

STREET & SMITH'S

DETECTIVE

STORY MAGAZINE

MARCH
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THE
WOMAN
WHO
COULD
NOT
DIE

BY JESSIE REYNOLDS

Robert Strain

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STREET & SMITH'S
Detective
Story Magazine

CONTENTS MARCH, 1942 • VOL. CLXIII NO. 5

COMPLETE NOVEL

THE WOMAN WHO COULD NOT DIE . . . Jessie Reynolds 9
Hate, love, terror and death followed this beautiful woman of fire.

NOVELETTES

CONNOISSEUR OF MURDER . . . Joseph C. Stacey 106
Nicky kept discovering bodies, and finally discovered the truth.

MURDER OF CONVENIENCE . . . William Brandon 124
What could have changed this peaceful cottage to a house of crime?

A DROP OF BLOOD . . . Dale Clark 137
Detective Harrigan didn't want glory at the expense of justice.

SHORT STORIES

MR. MYRTLE'S IMAGINATION . . . Robert Arthur 76
It was the only weapon he could use to fight against his destruction.

THE HAIR OF THE DOG . . . Murray Van Praag 91
Was this a careless hit-and-run driver? Or a man who deliberately killed?

DEATH IS A FACT . . . Leslie M. William 103
That's why the homicide chief told his sleuths not to get fancy.

FEATURES

DETECTIVE STORY NOTES . . . 6

CLUES TO CHARACTER . . . Neila Andreyeff 86
Learn handwriting analysis in a practical way.

CHARACTER QUIZ . . . 123
Here's an interesting test for you. Try it!

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DETECTIVE STORY NOTES

Fredric Brown, author of "A Cat Walks—" which will be featured in next month's Detective Story Magazine, started writing professionally only a few years ago, but already is well known as a writer of crime stories which usually have some different angle than the run-of-the-mill stuff. His first published story, by the way, was run in this magazine back in 1938.

He was a proofreader at that time, and decided to hold on to his job for a time before testing his wings in full flight. He made the big leap last year, and now devotes his full time to writing.

Mr. Brown is thirty-five, is married and has two young sons. He plays chess, golf and the flute; "none of them well," he admits.

Just how Mr. Brown conceived the idea for his forthcoming story, "A Cat Walks—" he doesn't say. But it is obvious that he knows a great deal about cats, and for some time there has been no question about his knowledge of the technique of detective-story writing, and the combination results in a very interesting yarn.

"A Cat Walks—" is not all about cats, however. Its central human

characters are a young man who operates a pet shop and a young woman who has boarded her cat with him for a few days, only to discover, when she returns to get the animal, that it had been sold by mistake. That in itself would mean a lot of excitement for a cat fancier, but that's just the beginning. The trail of the pet-shop owner and the owner of the cat, in trying to recover the pet, leads to discovery of crime on a large scale. The cat itself helps out in some rather subtle detective work. To tell more here would be to spoil the suspense of a charming story.

Inez Sabastian, whose stories have appeared in various magazines, is the author of the complete novel in next month's issue, "Murder by Moonlight." We think—in fact, we feel quite certain—that you'll like the characters in this novel. We'll wager that you've met persons in real life just like them, especially if you have ever lived in a suburban community.

Murder is murder, wherever you find it; yet in great cities most of us, fortunately, never come in direct contact with it. We see a headline in the paper, we read it and, unless the circumstances are most unusual, promptly forget it. But in a small, fashionable suburban colony, murder sets the town by the ears. It is something close, something personal, when the murder victim was known by everybody. And where there's a murder victim, there's also a murderer. In "Murder by Moonlight," you learn who the murder victim is in the first few pages. But we'll guarantee that you don't guess the identity of the killer till you're just about on the last page. And you'll stick to the story till you reach that last page. It's that kind of story.

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MORE MONEY

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THE WOMAN WHO COULD NOT DIE

by JESSIE REYNOLDS

*She was a woman of fire, a beautiful
spirit of evil who left a trail of
hate, of love, of terror—and death.*

I.

Truth may be stranger than fiction and harder to believe, but it has this one advantage—for me, at least—it is easier to tell.

I am no writer to take the skeleton of a plot, pad it and mold it and breathe life into it with fancy thoughts and fancy words. I am an engineer. I've been taught to plot

my words with a triangle and a square. To follow a straight line. Truth is straight. As straight as the finger of God. And perhaps that is just what it is—God's finger showing the way. At least it would take a braver and a wiser man than I to deny it—after those days and nights I spent on Mantrap Island.

There never was a time from the first that the truth wasn't there be-

fore us if our eyes hadn't been too blinded by horror and suspicion and fear to see it. And remembered horror and remembered fears are like grubs that fatten in the darkness. To kill them, one must turn over the stones where they hide.

It is not only for my own peace of mind that I am trying to rid myself of them here, but Solveig's as well. Solveig Thorsson, who shared them with me.

It all began that first day I met her. But perhaps I'd better explain things a little—who I am, and how that meeting came about. This is a strange story to offer a twentieth-century world. I'd like you to have a little faith in the man who, by the grace of some unseen and merciful Power, is living to give it to you. And that mercy didn't cover only Mantrap and its horrors—it had covered France as well.

Those of you who followed that historic blitz of Hitler's through your maps and radios and newspapers probably know a lot more about it than I would. I only happened to be in it.

I was driving an ambulance for the American Red Cross then—Dennis O'Hara, twenty-eight, out for the Great Adventure and having himself a hell of a time. And I'm not being profane when I say that. It is just what I was having, for I was part of that mad dash for the Channel, with the Jerries right on our tails every inch of the way.

Me, I was lucky. When we shipped at Dunkirk I still had my arms and legs. A lot of the poor devils I helped carry aboard those packed and waiting transports, hadn't.

I could have stayed in England. I was needed badly enough, but I'd had all I wanted of other people's wars. The old U. S. A. was looking

pretty good to me and I still had another year on my engineering course at Minnesota U.

All I'd brought out of France were the clothes on my back, my identification papers and a franc or two. But a young English officer, who thought I'd done him a favor by saving his life so another Stuka could blast it out of him again, staked me to a new outfit, cigarette money and passage on a convoy bound for Canada. Once there, my feet safe on the ground and no more bombs to duck, I didn't lose any time heading for home.

Not that I was any prodigal son with doting parents waiting to kill the fatted calf for me. I'd been raised in an orphanage and been on my own ever since I was fourteen. Home for me, right then, was the Minnesota campus and the scholarship that was being held there for me.

I'd made my plans on the way over and knew fairly well what I wanted to do.

During my second and third year at college, I'd earned my way acting as lifeguard at Lake City. That's a big resort town at the head of Lost Lake, and any Minnesotan will know where that is. In the Big Pine country, as far north in Minnesota as you can go, and forming part of the border line between the States and Canada. And they will tell you tales of the muskies in it that will make your hair curl.

It's a vacationer's paradise, Lost Lake, but it's no lily pond, believe me! Fifty miles—maybe more—from end to end, and a good wind blowing down it will pile up waves that can—and do—keep even the commercial fishing boats tied up for days at a time.

Lake City is on the American side, and a good long trek from Montreal

when a guy has to hitchhike and hoof it. The busy season begins right after Decoration Day, but it never gets into its full swing until around the Fourth, and with my boat docking as it did about the middle of June, I still had hopes of being able to land a job of some kind with the Lake City Hotel, once I could get there. I didn't care whether it was lifeguarding or bus boy. All I wanted was to get a little money ahead and give my nerves a chance to settle. I wanted to hear the clatter of dishes and the sound of the dinner gong and fat dames beefing about their grub while they shoveled it down. I wanted the common, everyday things of life. I wanted peace.

I was to remember that afterward and laugh. It was anything but the common, everyday things of life, anything but peace, that was waiting for me that evening of the twenty-fifth of June when I stood leaning against old Lars Pedarson's boat-house at the Cove, trying to bum a ride from him up to Lake City.

The Cove is on the Canadian side, but close enough to Lake City to make quite a bit out of the resort business. Fish, mostly, but butter and eggs, and farm stuff, too, and guides for the big muskie parties that fish up and down the lake.

Lars did guide work and owned a couple of boats, but his real job—to him—was being constable at the Cove. Proud as a turkey gobbler of the badge pinned to his blue shirt. He took an awful lot of kidding from the city folks at the Lake Hotel, but it never seemed to bother him much. He always had a drawled, good-natured answer of some sort, and he could spit through that straggly mustache of his farther than any guy I've ever seen.

I'd met him the last season I'd

worked on the Lake City beach, and had done my share of the kidding. But that badge of his was a real badge, and there was something about the man himself, in spite of his sixty-odd years, that made you realize he'd know how to use it, if he had to. And for other things than unlicensed fishing and deer hunting out of season.

Lars, around the Lake City hotels the way he was, met a good many people, year in and year out. I didn't expect him to remember me, and he didn't, really. But he didn't look as though he thought I was lying. We were talking along, as easily as you please, with me telling him where I'd been, and where I wanted to go, and why, and the frogs croaking their chorus from the weeds, when I heard the racket on the steps leading down to the wharf. That was when I turned to see what was happening, and got my first glimpse of Solveig Thorsson.

I'm not claiming any heartbeats and love-at-first-sight palpitations. I didn't have any. It takes time for a thing like that to work through the hide of a fellow who's knocked around as long as I had. What I really thought was: "Boy! There's a gal what is a gal!" And she was.

I'm a big man—six-feet-two in my socks. But this girl wasn't giving me any more than four inches, if that. She was wearing slacks and a sweat shirt, and her hair was like a sheaf of ripe wheat, tumbling clear to her shoulders. Not yellow, mind you, but a rich, russet-gold that the deep, soft tan of her face picked up and echoed.

Those were the things my mind was seeing even while my eyes were taking in the drunken bum in the greasy overalls shambling along behind her, taking the tongue-lashing she was tossing at him over her

shoulder. And I said: "Good Lord, constable! Who is she? Where does she come from? What's her name?" and watched his pale-blue eyes crinkle.

"Name's Thorsson. Solveig Thorsson. You ought to know her pa, if you've been around Lost Lake the way you claim. He's the writer who bought Mantrap six-eight years back, and been spending his summers there ever since.

"That's Pete Borsch with her. Works on the island. Odd-job man. Drunk again. Mebbe when they go by, I'd best see if she needs some help."

"Leave it to me," I begged. "Come on, Pedarson! Be a good guy and let me handle it!"

They were still quite a bit above us, but I knew they were heading for the small white launch with *Mantrap* on its side, that was tied up at the wharf. While I waited, knowing they'd have to pass Lars and me to reach it, I raked back over the things I'd heard about Thorsson. Archaeologist, famous in his field, wealthy; spent his winters poking around ancient Aztec ruins down in Mexico, and his summers on that three square miles of isolated, pine-covered rock in the middle of Lost Lake, writing about them. Sure, I knew of him, but I didn't know him. No one did.

Mantrap Island lay outside the Canadian riparian right, and within United States jurisdiction, but it got its mail through the Cove, did its shopping through the Cove, and it didn't encourage visitors. Pleasure launches and picnic parties were warned never to stop there. And although the Lake City steamer had taken on and put off passengers at practically every cluster of cabins the length of the lake, at some time or other in its twice-a-day summer

schedule, it had never stopped at Mantrap.

Coming up in the spring, the Thorssons came by way of Canada, with Lars ferrying them over from the Cove. When they left in the fall, Lars went after them, and brought them over, bag and baggage. The stories I'd heard about Thorsson and his island had always intrigued me. But if I'd known he'd had a girl like this shut up on it—

She was almost up to us now, and paying about as much attention to us as though we had been part of the building against which we leaned. Her voice and her eyes were all for the sullen lout behind her. I'd only heard the mumble of her voice before, and the angry vehemence in it, but now I was hearing the words.

"No use getting ugly about it, Pete. You're through. You've got the key to the launch in your pocket, and I want it. I'm taking it back to the island alone. I'll have your things packed and brought over to you tomorrow morning, with a check for whatever you've got coming to you. But if you ever step foot on Mantrap again, and my father catches you, you're going to get the beating I'd have given you myself up there in the village, if I'd been a man. You're a lying, snooping, drunken bum, shooting off your mouth about things that don't concern you. You're a—"

I could see the man's face plainly by that time, and I didn't like the looks of it. I shook the bundle I'd been carrying off my shoulders, stepped out until I wasn't two feet away from him, and loosened the kinks out of my arms. But the guy wasn't seeing me any more than the girl was, and I got the full blast of his whiskey-soaked defiance:

"A beating, huh? Big talk, sister.

He'd better beat up that white-faced tart he's married to, and the guy who's sleeping with her behind his back. Beating? Don't make me laugh. And if I'm getting the sack, I'm not getting it from any half-baked girl in man's pants. Not Pete Borsch.

"So it's the key to your damn boat you want, is it? Let's see you get it. Go on, make a try."

II.

I doubt if Pete Borsch knew what struck him. One minute he was standing there grinning his ugly grin, and the next he was upside down, and I was shaking him by the heels.

The key was part of the litter that spilled from his overalls pockets. I held him squirming like a fish on the end of a line, while I kicked the key over to the girl.

"That it?" I grinned, and watched her as she picked it up. When she nodded a startled answer, I stood the guy on his feet and held him while the blood emptied from his purpled face.

Pedarson had ambled up by that time and was standing beside me pushing out his chest with the big nickel badge on it.

There was still a lot of whiskey fight in Pete, but between my size and that badge Pedarson was flashing, he didn't try to use it. Stood for a second, his bloodshot eyes narrowed on us, his lips snarled back over broken, tobacco-yellowed teeth; then, without a word, swooped up his scattered belongings, stuffed them into his pockets, and headed back up the steps that led to the street.

"Want me to run him in?" Pedarson asked.

The girl shook her head. "Let him go, but keep him away from

Mantrap," she said huskily. "It wouldn't be very safe for him there just now—not if dad finds out what sort of stuff he's been spreading."

She wasn't looking at the sheriff when she said it, though; she was looking at Borsch, and she kept looking after him as, with the sheriff following, he disappeared above the top of the bank. But I had the feeling she wasn't seeing him at all. And I knew she hadn't been, when her glance swung slowly back to where I was, and I saw her eyes squarely for the first time.

I'd seen a lot of misery in the last few months, a lot of hopelessness, but it had been where it had a right to be, in the faces of people who had seen their homes wrecked by bombs and shells, their freedom lost through treachery and defeat, their happiness blasted from them. I'd never seen it in the face of a young girl like Solveig Thorsson, with beauty, health and well-being stamped all over her. But it was there, all right. In her eyes, in her face, and in her voice, heavy with the bitterness behind it.

"'A half-baked girl in man's pants.' That's what he called me, and he's right. A lot of good I've done, getting rid of Pete—it isn't changing anything. It's just making it worse. Dad will ask me why I let him go, and I'll have to tell him the truth. And I'd rather be dead! I wish I were. I do! Oh, I do!"

She hadn't been actually talking to me. I realized that, just as I realized that she hadn't been seeing Borsch walking away from us. What Borsch had let drop was making it pretty plain to me what she was seeing and hearing, and how deep the hurt was going. She made me think of a big-eyed child, lost in the dark and scared, and I blurted:

"Lord, kid! Nothing is that bad.

Nothing. I've just come back from France. Hitler left a lot of death behind him there, and none of it was pretty."

She jumped as though I'd shaken her out of a nightmare, while her eyes, conscious of me at last, swept me from head to foot.

They were lovely eyes, in spite of the unhappiness that clouded them. Eyes blue as gentians and fringed with dark, coppery-edged lashes like a curtain. But the wide mouth that was made for friendliness and laughter was sober, twisted, hard. And there was a cynicism about the words that came from it that shocked me. It was so strangely out of place, on those soft, young lips.

"Not pretty, perhaps, but clean. There are a lot of things worse than dying. Live on Mantrap for a while, and find out."

I thought back over some of the deaths I'd seen that had been anything but clean, and of this child daring to put her own petty troubles against them, and laughed. I couldn't help it. I was sorry as soon as I'd done it, though, for I could see by the way she flamed against it how furious it had made her.

"O. K.—laugh! You think I'm a silly girl, dramatizing myself! You're a man—you know all the answers.

"I tell you that death is clean, no matter how it comes. Cleaner than hate and sin and shame. Cleaner than lies and deceit. Did you ever watch murder being born? Feel the wish to kill growing in you until you are black all through? Watch it growing in other faces, too, like a little cloud at first, spreading . . . spreading? I have.

"You don't believe me. You think I'm crazy. Maybe I am. You'd be crazy, too, if you were in my place, living as I have to on that island,

watching what I have to watch, day after day."

I wasn't laughing any more. There was real fear in those eyes of hers—deep wells of it, darkening them. And fear was in her voice, crying through its anger. Crying for a help she needed, and was too proud and stubborn to ask for.

I had the crazy feeling that, unconsciously, she was asking it of me.

I always had acted first and thought afterward. If I hadn't been built that way, I wouldn't have headed for France on the first crazy impulse in me. I was heading for another place now, and there were going to be plenty of times when, if it hadn't been for Solveig, I could have wished I hadn't.

"L-look here," I stuttered, "I don't know what an 'odd-job' man is supposed to do on Mantrap, but whatever it is, if that bum you just got rid of could fill the bill, I can.

"Your name's Solveig Thorsson. Lars Pedarson told me. Mine's Dennis O'Hara. Lars will vouch for that, too. I had a couple of summers working over at Lake City, and he knows me. I told you I'd been in France. I'm back now to finish my engineering course at Minnesota U., and I need a job for the summer.

"I'm not trying to high-pressure you into giving me one. But suppose you ferry me over to see your father. Maybe he'll take me on in Borsch's place. As for recommendations—whiskey isn't one of my failings. Nor prying into things that don't concern me and talking about them afterward."

"How about 'rescuing maidens in distress'?" she asked, twistedly. "Do you make a habit of that, Mr. Dennis O'Hara?"

And she wasn't being sarcastic. She was just letting me know that she understood what was behind that

crazy suggestion of mine and was grateful for it, with her eyes holding mine so straight I couldn't do a thing but stand there, dumb as a boy, and my face red as fire.

I felt as though she were seeing right into me—everything I'd ever been or done, and there were a few things I'd just as soon a girl like her wouldn't have seen. But, if she felt them there, it didn't seem to bother her any, for when she started for her boat at last she said: "O. K., we'll see what dad says," and motioned me to follow.

I guess I must have been holding my breath, waiting, for it went out of me with a grunt, then, and I knew if she hadn't taken me I'd have hired a boat from Lars and gone, anyway; that I'd made up my mind to hire myself out to James Thorsen, if it was the last thing I ever did.

It was a good thing I didn't know how near it was to being the last thing!

While Solveig took her place at the wheel, I untied the rope and swung my long body into place on the seat beside her. The launch wasn't a large one, but it had a sweet little engine that caught without a sputter. She headed it straight into the setting sun while I eased myself back among the packages that cluttered it, and lit a cigarette.

Solveig's words back on the pier—"Have you ever watched murder being born?"—were saying themselves over inside me. They weren't inviting light chatter, but they were starting me on a little serious thinking. That bum of a Borsch and his snarled blustering, "If there's any beating to be done, your father'd better beat up that white-faced tart he's married to, and the guy who's sleeping with her behind his back—"

Sitting there, watching Solveig's

firm brown hand on the wheel and the play of light in her shining hair, I let those words and what they implied sink into me, and there was a lump in my throat the size of an egg. Good Lord! No wonder the poor kid was half crazy, watching a thing like that going on with her own mother!

I'd meant to let any further talk come from her, but thinking that over, I said soberly:

"Perhaps you'd better know that I heard your friend Pete Borsch blowing off when you were coming down the steps at the Cove. I wouldn't take what a guy like him says too seriously, if I were you; particularly when he's trying to throw dirt on your . . . mother. Lies, you know, come easier than truth from bums like that."

She didn't even turn her head. There wasn't any life in her voice at all. It was flat as a board.

"My mother died when I was twelve. I'm eighteen now. The woman Pete was talking about is my stepmother. And the man is the man I'm supposed to be engaged to. His name is Steve Greyling. He's my father's secretary. And Pete wasn't lying. He was telling the truth."

I felt as though a bomb had hit me in the stomach, and I blurted stupidly:

"Hell's bells! What sort of guy is this Greyling, anyway? Engaged to you, and playing around with your father's wife. Crazy? Or just plain heel?"

"Wait until you see Carla," she said softly, "before you blame him too much! That's what Carla does to men. You're young and good-looking. She'll probably drive you crazy, too. It's the way she gets her fun."

There was something in the pic-

ture those words of Solveig's drew for me that made the chills crawl up my spine. And my answer was sharper than I'd meant it to be.

"I told you, if you remember, that whiskey wasn't one of my vices, nor spying. I didn't think it was necessary to say that married women weren't, either. Not even good-looking ones. But I'm saying it now."

She smiled a little at that—the first smile I'd drawn out of her. But it didn't last long.

"Carla isn't 'good-looking,' she said soberly. "She's beautiful. The most beautiful woman I've ever seen. And she's years younger than dad. She's not really much older than I am. She may be twenty-three or twenty-four—no more, and she hasn't had a very happy life."

She stopped there, wondering. I guessed, why she was telling me all this. I didn't say a word. Just waited. I had a hunch it sort of eased her to talk, and she'd go on if I gave her time enough. She did, and I could see she hated this step-mother of hers like poison, but was trying to be honest about her, even through her hate.

"Carla's mother was a Boston woman. She met Santos Mendez, Carla's father, when she was on a visit to Mexico. He was a wealthy Spanish landowner, with a big estate up in the mountains out of Mexico City. Quite handsome and . . . and romantic. A catch for a poor young girl from the North. She married him there—never went back home again. Died when Carla and her twin sister Lotta were born.

"Four or five years afterward he married again, a Spanish woman this time. They had a son, Miguel, and—well, I guess the second wife didn't care much for Carla and her sister, and the father sent them back to

Boston, to an aunt, who was the only living relative Carla's mother had. He didn't even take them himself. Sent them in care of an old Indian nurse, Tonya, who had raised them. Been all the mother they'd ever known.

"I think . . . I think that's where Carla gets her evil. She's awful—Tonya. Terrible. She's fat and . . . and slimy. She's got eyes like a cat, eyes that see in the dark, and she walks like a cat, too. Creeps up on you and you never know she's there till you see her. She's got an altar in her room, with an ugly, squat idol grinning on it, and she gives it things to eat—chicken's blood in bowls, dirty things like that.

"Dad doesn't mind. He's lived with the Indians, studied them. But I think it's horrible. And the way she worships Carla makes me just as sick. Carla flies into awful rages, and strikes her and throws things at her, and yet Tonya would die for her. She'd do anything Carla told her to do! Anything!"

Solveig's voice was rising into what was almost a scream, and conscious of it and of the surprise in my widened eyes, her face flushed.

"I'm sorry," she gulped. "I didn't mean to let myself go that way. Tonya's never really done anything to me. It's just that . . . that I've never seen anyone like her before, and she scares me.

"It was Carla I was trying to tell you about—Carla and her sister. You see, they'd never liked it up North—been lonely and unhappy there, so when they were fourteen or fifteen, and their aunt died, Tonya took them back to Mexico. After that—" Her voice trailed off, and when she started to talk again her words were hesitant, slow and childishly apologetic. As though she were afraid I might laugh at her again.

"I know this is going to sound as though I was making it up from some story I'd been reading somewhere, but I'm not. It's true. Dad told me, and he knows. He says Mexico is a strange place, and strange things can happen there. That men like Carla's father, with their thousands of acres of land, and their pure Spanish blood, were arrogant, and . . . and ruthless. That they treated the peons like slaves. I guess Santos Mendez was like that.

"Anyway, when the peons began to rebel, and form bandit armies up in the hills, the Mendez hacienda was among the first to be raided. It must have been pretty terrible. Miguel was a grown boy then, and at school in California. But the rest of the family—Carla, her father, her stepmother, her sister—were at home.

"The whole place was pillaged and burned. They were all killed, but Carla and Tonya. Even the servants.

"Some way or other, Carla and Tonya escaped and got to Mexico City. They hadn't any money, but there were some jewels that Tonya managed to save. They sold most of them to get money to live on. But there was one thing that Carla wouldn't sell—a big pigeon-blood ruby that had been in the Mendez family for generations. Carla says it once had been the eye of an Aztec god, and that one of the old Mendez men who had been with Cortez had pried it loose himself, with his sword.

"Next to Tonya, it is the most utterly evil thing I've ever seen, and I think Carla loves it more than anything in the world. It's . . . it's like a blob of frozen blood, and she wears it all the time hanging around her throat. She never takes it off. It's part of her. She wouldn't have sold that stone if she and Tonya had

starved. And they almost did, I guess—until Carla met my father."

III.

It was the way that came out, slowly, dragging around her twisting lips, that told me the end of her story—and an end so old it had whiskers. An infatuated, middle-aged man with money; a beautiful, unscrupulous woman out to get it. And I said, grinning a little wryly:

"You needn't finish. I take it Carla kept the ruby, and your father kept Carla, with Tonya thrown in for good measure. Miguel, too, I suppose?"

"If you mean, is dad giving him money to live on, I suppose so, yes. At least he's on Mantrap now, spending the summer with us. But Miguel is all right. He's proud, and he doesn't want to sponge on dad. He wouldn't have to, if Carla did what was right. That ruby is worth a fortune—fifty thousand, I guess, maybe more. He wants Carla to sell it, and give him his share, and she won't. She just laughs at him.

"Miguel likes the North. He'd like to take out naturalization papers and never go back to Mexico again. He even likes the island, as much as Carla hates it. We had swell times together at first. But now he's fighting Carla all the time, and it makes him moody and miserable. He's no fun any more. Nothing is. It's just an ugly mess, and there isn't a thing I can do about it. Not a thing."

"Ever try talking to Greyling?" I said. "After all, when a man is engaged to a girl, she's got the right to try and beat a little sense into him."

She didn't answer. I don't think she even heard me. The island was almost before us by that time,

springing dark-shadowed out of the growing dusk. I watched her eyes swing to it and sweep it for a long instant, while she cut off her motor and let the boat drift with the current as though she hated the very thought of bringing it in.

The setting sun was fully on her tanned face, touching it with a deeper glow, and sprinkling gold dust across the strands of her wind-blown hair. She brushed a loose lock back with a careless gesture, but her somber gaze never swerved from the rocky, high-cliffed shores ahead of us.

I knew she was seeing things there I couldn't see, and hearing things my ears weren't tuned to, but I could feel them weaving themselves into the silence that held us. Ugly things—greed and lust and hate. The things murder is made of.

Murder! My imagination never had been the sort that worked overtime. But it was doing a good job of it then, for it seemed to me I could hear that word, even in the lapping of the waves against the boat, and its threat lay heavy and thick as the fog that was rising all around us.

I couldn't blame Solveig for not wanting to dock. I didn't much, myself, and when she brought the launch around at last, and headed for the wharf, the bells inside me ringing their "Danger Ahead" were so loud it's a wonder she didn't hear them.

I had seen Mantrap Island a good many times from the deck of the Lake City steamer. A long, narrow strip of wooded rock, shaped much like a kidney bean, with an artificial white-sand beach dotting its in-curved middle, like an eye.

James Thorsson had brought the white sand down by barge and turned it into a bathing beach when

he had bought the place and built the rambling log lodge that topped its piney crest.

Solveig spoke a little about that, as she brought the boat in, and waited as I unloaded the supplies she'd brought over from the Cove and piled them on the long, loose-boarded planks.

"That was just after mother died. Between six and seven years ago. I told you I was only twelve, but I was big even then, and strong. Dad and I came up and lived in a tent until the house was done. We helped the carpenters, lugged boards and drove nails, and had a lot of fun. And after that, every summer, dad and I would build other things, like his study, up beyond the house. Steve was with dad then, and the three of us did it together. Even to the fireplace, and a sort of passageway, roofed in and sided, that joined it to the living room of the house, so we could go back and forth without getting wet.

"I was sixteen then, and Steve was twenty-two, just out of college. We were so terribly in love. And dad had promised we could be married when I was eighteen. It was the loveliest summer! I'd never been so happy. There were times when I couldn't hold it in. When I'd stand on the top of the hill up there, with the wind blowing my hair, and laugh and shout. It was such fun, just being alive. But now—"

She didn't finish that. I felt her draw her breath on a choke, with her hand flying out as though she were pushing something away from her, and following her eyes, I saw we weren't alone any more; that there was another figure on the narrow pier, and so near I could have pushed it back myself, had I tried.

The fog that had been rising, even before we docked, was thick about

us now, swirling, shifting. It swirled and shifted around that dark shadow before me, until I had the eerie feeling that I was watching a jinni materialize from the Arabian Nights bottle that had held it. Then the eeriness was gone, and I was chuckling a little shamedly:

"If that's your Tonya, kid, you'd better put a bell on her! She's scared me out of a year's growth."

And Solveig was crying sharply: "Tonya! I've told you a dozen times not to come sneaking up on people like that! I suppose you are after the stuff for the kitchen. All right—take what you can, and we'll bring the rest. This is Dennis O'Hara. Pete got drunk over at the Cove, and I let him go. Dennis is taking his place."

The woman gave a grunt that might have meant anything or nothing, and swung a carton of groceries to her head.

It was too dark for me to see her. But I had the feeling she was seeing me. I could feel her eyes like fingers on me. And, watching her as she swung back to the beach, with her full skirts swinging from her broad hips like sails, I could see why she could walk so silently. She was shoeless, her bare, flat feet finding their way over the loose boarding as smoothly as a sliding snake. She gave me the feeling of a snake, too, and I don't like snakes. I understood then why Solveig could grow hysterical when she talked of her.

Solveig and I had followed after her, our own arms loaded. As we reached the beach, Solveig nodded to the left, where a two-story, stilted building jutted out over the water.

"The boathouse. Your room is on the top floor. You reach it by those outside stairs. The generator for the electric system is underneath, right back of the shelter for the

launch. After we've gone up to the house and seen dad, you can come down and put the boat away. It's going to storm tonight—the radio at Lake City has been sending out warnings all afternoon."

The few extra clothes I'd bought in London were in the duffel bag one of the convoy sailors had given me. It was an awkward thing to carry, loaded with bundles as I was, and I'd left it on the wharf.

Solveig saw it there, and went back after it. "You go on ahead," she told me. "Follow Tonya up that path. You can't miss it. I'll drop your bag on the boathouse stairs. I want to see if Pete turned the fishing skiff up to dry, the way I told him to. It's got a hole in it, and has to be fixed."

I was ashamed, letting her lug that dirty bundle for me, but I was glad enough afterward that I had. If Solveig had been in front of me going up that path, instead of a good long ways behind, she might not have liked what she would have seen.

The path was a handmade path of gravel and stone, with laurel and scrub oak and sumach on either side. As Solveig had said, I couldn't miss it. But it was a good, stiff climb, with the mosquitoes buzzing around my head, out of a hot, sticky darkness, thick as pitch.

I couldn't hear Solveig behind me, and I couldn't see Tonya ahead of me. I seemed lost somewhere in between, with my rubber-soled sneakers as silent as Tonya's bare feet had been.

That storm Solveig had spoken about was gathering, all right. I could hear the thunder rolling faintly in the west. From somewhere on the island a loon laughed, and in one of the branches that roofed the path, a hoot owl screamed

its mocking answer, and I jumped like a scared rabbit.

I was still chuckling at that when I shouldered the last of the low-hanging bushes aside and saw the smooth sweep of a well-cared-for lawn beyond and, in the midst of it, the lodge, with its brightly lighted windows shining at me.

Once, as a kid, I'd been lost in a swamp on a Minnesota farm. Nothing had ever looked so grand to me as the red barn I'd seen when I found my way out at last. All at once I was remembering that, and feeling the same thrill going over me.

Solveig and her story of violent death in a far-away land; of rubies like gobs of frozen blood; that black heathen woman on ahead of me somewhere with her billowing skirts and bare, noiseless feet; the uphill climb with the unfamiliar darkness pressing on me—they had held the terrors of the swamp all over again, and the house with its cheerful lights was the old red barn, reaching out its reassuring welcome across long-forgotten years. I stopped stock-still, staring at it, liking the feeling it gave me.

I couldn't have stood there over a minute, though, before I was conscious of the murmur of voices. They seemed to be coming from a rhododendron clump to the right, and, squinting against the gloom, I could make out two people sheltered from view of the house by its thick, glossy branches. One was a woman—I could see her white dress. The other a man, and his arms were around her, holding her close against him.

It had been the woman's voice I'd heard first—low and soft, with laughter running through it. But that had been just a voice. The man's was louder, the harshness and

anger in it shaping it into words.

"Laugh, damn you! Drive me mad, and laugh! There are times when I could wring your beautiful neck with my bare hands. Haven't you played with me long enough? Tortured me enough? What do you think I'm made of? I'm asking you what you're going to do about it, and you laugh. Yes! I know the boat's back. I saw Tonya as well as you did, and Solveig and Borsch not far behind her. What if they are? What if they do see us? It's time this thing was settled. It's time—"

I'd probably have stayed right where I was if I hadn't heard a crackle on the path behind me that warned me Solveig wasn't far off. If this was only her father and his new wife having things out, it wasn't any of my butt-in—or Solveig's, either, for that matter. But on the other hand, if the man was Greyling, as I had a hunch it was, Solveig wasn't going to walk in on it if I could save her from it. And I thought: "Here's where I earn my first week's pay," and, whistling a high-pitched tune I'd brought back from France with me, I stepped out in the open.

I couldn't see the man and the woman any better than I had before—their faces were in the shadows, but the clouds had drifted a little from a big full moon, and what light there was shone full on me.

I heard the man swear and the woman give a scared, surprised squeak before she broke away from his arms and ran; her white skirts flying, across the lawn and to the house.

The man was still there when I turned to send a hail down the path to Solveig, and catching her answering one, held the bushes aside for her. But when I faced the

rhododendron clump again, with Solveig beside me, he had gone, and I was thinking grimly:

"If that was friend Greyling, he's going to have a few uneasy moments, and so's that dame with him, for they'll never know whether I saw them or not. And I'm not telling."

With the necessity of explaining me to her father and telling about the quarrel with Pete getting closer and closer, Solveig was trying to hide her nervousness by talking against it. Her tongue was going a streak. Pete hadn't upended the fishing boat as she'd told him to. Had just dragged it up on the beach with the oars still in it. She'd stopped to turn it over against the storm that would surely hit before morning, and to take the oars out. One of the oarlocks had fallen off in the sand. Would I remember to pick it up when I went down, and put it on top of the boat so it wouldn't be lost? And my duffel bag—she'd put it under the steps of the boathouse. If it rained before I had a chance to pick it up, that would keep it dry.

She was still chattering when we reached the kitchen, but her eyes were getting saucer-big, and when she'd stop for a second I could hear the bubble of her breathing as though, deep inside her, she was crying.

Just outside the door, she stopped me. "I've decided not to tell dad what Pete said over at the Cove—about Carla and . . . and Steve. I . . . I can't shame him that way. I'm telling him that Pete was drunk once too often, and I had to let him go. I'm a coward, that's all. I thought I had the nerve to face it, but—"

"If a thing like that is going on, he probably knows it, anyway," I said bluntly. "What you said, or what Pete said, wouldn't make much

difference, anyway. So I wouldn't worry."

Tonya was in the kitchen putting away the groceries she'd brought, when Solveig pushed the door open and I followed her inside.

I don't remember much about the room, except that it was big. But, big as it was, Tonya seemed to fill it. Not tall, like Solveig and me, but fat! Lord! The fat on that woman! Rolling mounds of it, starting with her face, and going down over her huge bosom and broad, swaying hips, until you could almost see it beneath her clothes, waves of black flesh that had something obscene and revolting about them.

Solveig had called her black, but seen in the glaring ceiling light, her face wasn't really black—it was more the color of a smoked bacon rind. It was only her eyes that were truly black. Two burning coals, pushed into that greasy face, and smoking out of the fatty folds that held them.

They weren't pleasant eyes. And the look they gave me wasn't a pleasant look or a welcoming one.

I'm a big man and I like my food, but eating three meals a day with those black beads on me wouldn't make me feel too happy.

We added our parcels to the heap on the table, and Solveig said, glancing to the electric range where dinner was simmering:

"Time to see dad before dinner, Dennis. He'll be in the living room, probably. Let's get it over with." She motioned me to follow her.

"Don't think that dame will poison my food, or something?" I whispered, as I closed the door behind me.

I'd meant that as a joke. The seriousness of Solveig's answer sort of took the wind out of me.

"She would if Carla asked her to. She'd do it quick as she'd kill a chicken for that heathen god of hers."

I managed a grin, hoping Solveig wouldn't notice how sickly it was.

If that had been Carla and her lover I'd caught under the rhododendron a few minutes back, and she should happen to hold it against me—well, she might call Tonya in, at that!

It wasn't a pleasant idea. But I didn't put it into words. I followed after Solveig, and stared around me.

IV.

The kitchen opened into a long, narrow hallway, with a stairway leading to the second floor, and an outside door to the yard. At the other end was an archway into a dining room, for I could see the table laid for dinner; and just beyond that, another arch, with curtains drawn across it and light streaming through them.

I knew it must be the living room, and that we were probably heading for it, but I wasn't in any hurry and was lagging a little behind, taking things in, as a person does in a new place. That was why I saw, what Solveig didn't, a woman's face staring down at me from those narrow back stairs.

It was there for scarcely a breath before it was gone, with the soft swish of white skirts trailing after it, but it had been there, all right, and I laughed to myself.

The lady of the rhododendrons, getting a preview, and wondering whether I'd had one! It was a laugh, all right, but it had possibilities that might not be so funny. I was thinking of some of them, when Solveig pulled the curtain aside and waited

for me to go into the living room with her.

It was a big, comfortable room, with Indian rugs on the floor, and gay Mexican tapestries everywhere. On the knotty pine walls, draping the wide stairs that led to a balconied floor above, and covering even the balcony with splotches of brilliant color. The rough stone fireplace, large enough for the proverbial yule log, took up one end of the room, and through the open windows the rank, weedy smell that a lake gives off after a hot day drifted in to me, heavy with the threat of the coming storm.

Because the room could have held twenty people in comfort, the one man it did hold seemed lost in its shadowy emptiness. He rose when he saw us and came toward us, a tall, gauntly handsome man whom I would have known as Solveig's father, even if her "Hello, dad" hadn't told me.

He certainly seemed surprised enough to see me. If he wasn't, it was good acting.

I could see Solveig's hands shake, and by the way she bit her lips, I knew they were trembling, and she got her story out quickly, as though to stop any questions her father might ask before he had time to ask them. That Pete had been drunk and insolent, and she'd lost her temper and fired him. That he refused to give her the key to the launch so she could get back to the island, and that I'd been there and made him. She told him what she could about me—that I was just back from France, and heading for Lake City for a summer's work, and that I'd like to have Pete's job if he'd give it to me.

I knew when Mr. Thorsson turned to me and began to ask me questions, but I'd been so lost trying to tie

him up with the man I'd seen in the yard that I had to jerk myself into listening. "Maybe his voice will tell me," I thought, and I said, "Sir?" and waited.

It didn't tell me anything. That other voice I'd heard had been hoarse and choked with passion. This one, while not exactly friendly, was quiet and coldly courteous. Just explaining that it was a rather irregular proceeding all around, and that, as Mantrap was such an isolated place, and theirs the only family on it, he'd have to know a little more about me.

I was glad, for Solveig's sake, to keep the talk away from Pete Borsch, and while I hadn't come out of France with any recommendations as an "odd-job" man, I hauled out what I could find. My identification papers, a letter from a buddy, written in French, and kidding me about some nurse whose name I couldn't even remember. Mr. Thorsson didn't read French, and he passed that over to Solveig. I sure took a beating when she read that aloud, her eyes impish over the scribbled page. Even Mr. Thorsson got a twisted ghost of a grin, from my scarlet face.

"I would rather Solveig hadn't taken it on herself to get rid of Borsch," he said at last. "Handling a fellow like that is really a man's job. Yet, as long as she did, and you say you want his place"—he flipped my papers a second before he handed them back to me, giving them another glance—"I guess I'll take a chance.

"Did I understand from Solveig that you've worked at Lake City, and that Pedarson at the Cove knows you? All right. I'll be going over tomorrow probably, and I'll check up with him. In the meantime—I suppose Solveig has told you what

your duties are. Look after the electric system, do whatever is needed around the house.

"Your room is over the boathouse, and Tonya will take care of your meals in the kitchen. Now— Oh, wait. We might as well explain things to the rest of the family. I see they are coming."

They were coming—and from both ways. A stirring on the stairs behind me, and the sound of footsteps and voices beyond the open French doors that looked out on the veranda that fronted the house.

It was to the stairway that I turned first. I knew that white dress I'd seen flitting up the back way would be coming down the front before long. And it was. A low-cut dinner gown, clothing a body as slender and as straight as a sword. A face like a cameo, drawn back by the weight of the coal-black hair that crowned it. And around a throat that Neferiti herself might have envied, hanging from its heavy antique chain, was the ruby. "A glob of frozen blood," Solveig had said. No, it wasn't that at all. Not on Carla. It was love and hate. It was lust and passion and desire. It was hot and living, and she wore it like a brand!

Solveig had told me she was beautiful. She was, but not the type of beauty I would have chosen as a companion for a comfortable old age. And picturing this gaunt, scholarly man before me, trying to live up to the needs of a beauty like this, I almost groaned.

I knew Mr. Thorsson was explaining me, not only to her, but to the others who had entered the room with her—that there had been trouble between Solveig and Pete at the Cove; that I had been of some assistance to Solveig, and she had brought me over to take Pete's place.

But those dark eyes of Carla's were searching my face so openly that it gave me a sort of malicious pleasure to show her how blank I could make it.

I knew she was thinking: "Just a stupid ox—I don't have to worry about him," when Mr. Thorsson's voice, sharp at my open staring, brought me back to myself with a jerk.

"There are others in the family, too, O'Hara, if you will give me your attention. This is Stephen Greyling, my secretary. And Miguel Mendez, Mrs. Thorsson's half brother, and our guest."

The boy was another edition of Carla—the same white skin and coal-black hair, the same dark pride. But there was a sullenness about his good looks that marred them. That stamped him for what I'd guessed him—a weak, spoiled kid, nursing a grudge.

I didn't waste any time on him, for just one look at Greyling told me I'd found my man of the rhododendron bush, and I could feel the hair on my neck prickling, like a dog heading for a scrap.

So this was Steve Greyling. This was the guy who could double-cross the man who had trusted him and the girl he was supposed to marry. Who didn't care whether he was caught or not. Who hated Carla and loved her enough to want to wring that pretty neck of hers, and who wanted a showdown, come hell or high water. O. K.—I'd let him have one. All nice and secret—just between the two of us. And I said, grinning a little:

"There's something familiar about you, Mr. Greyling. I think we must have seen each other somewhere before."

Oh, the man was handsome. Even I had to grant him that. He was tall

and well built and young. He had plenty of charm, when he wanted to use it. But he wasn't wasting any of it on me. If he had felt like wringing Carla's neck, half an hour before, he was itching to wring mine then. Man! I'll say he was. But I wasn't the one who got the blast that was boiling in him. That was Solveig's.

He gave me one long, scorching look, then he swung on her.

"Good God, Solveig! Haven't you any sense? Won't you ever have any? What in Heaven's name possessed you, pulling a stunt like this? If Pete had to be fired and someone else put in his place, your father was the one to do it, or me. But you couldn't do it that way. Brawling like a deckhand—making a spectacle of yourself for those hicks at the Cove to gossip about and laugh over, and winding up by bringing a panhandling, lousy tramp here to Mantrap, and planking him down on us! Where's the key to the launch? I'm taking this fellow back to the Cove. I'm—"

The key to the launch was in my pocket, and I was keeping it there until Thorsson told me to give it up. And if this guy thought he could call me a panhandling, lousy bum and get away with it—

My fists were doubled and my chin out a mile when Solveig pushed in front of me. Her father was saying things himself—to Greyling—but she wasn't waiting for that. Her face was white beneath its tan, and her blue eyes were almost as black as Carla's with the fury behind them.

"Maybe you'd better know," she said thickly, "just who the Cove is really gossiping about, Steve. And laughing over. Maybe you'd better know why I fired Pete. I didn't intend to tell, but I'm telling now. They are gossiping about you—and



*There was a crash and a jolt that
threw me headfirst over the wheel.*

Carla. And they are laughing at my father! They are laughing at the man, Pete tells them, who is so blind he can't see what's going on under his nose. Or sees it and is afraid to do anything about it.

"They're laughing over secret meetings and secret kisses, that aren't half as secret as you and Carla seem to think they've been, and that Pete slobbers out over the drinks they feed him.

"That's what I fired him for today. I happened to hear a couple

of his choicer morsels when he didn't know I was there."

I could hear Greyling's breath going out of him like the air from a pricked balloon, and you could have cut the silence that held us with a knife. There was the edge of a knife in Mr. Thorsson's voice when he did cut it.

"O'Hara, go to the kitchen. Tonya will give you your dinner. I'll take up your duties with you tomorrow. And you, Solveig, if you'll change into something more suitable—I

think our own dinner is waiting."

And that was that. Proud. I had to hand it to Thorsson. If there was any dirty linen to be washed, it wasn't going to be washed before the hired hands.

I went back into the kitchen and let Tonya shove my food at me. It was good food, but I'd lost my appetite. There was only one thing I wanted just then, and that was to give Steve Greyling a going over that would fix his good looks for a long time to come.

Solveig, the plucky devil of a kid, had let her temper run away with her, no doubt about that. She'd yanked the lid off a dirty mess. What was Thorsson going to do about it? Clamp it back on again, and call it the outbreak of a jealous young girl? Or give Greyling the showdown he'd asked for, and send him and Carla both, kiting?

I made a play at my food, gulped down my coffee, and watched Tonya sharpening a big meat knife, her fat shaking to the play of her arm, wondering if she'd take a hand in it herself, and just what she'd do if she did.

I had a feeling she'd heard as much of that scene in the living room as there'd been to hear. And whatever came out of it, she'd be right there rooting for Carla.

I wanted to get out of that kitchen and think things over. And Tonya wanted me out. She made that plain the way she shoved an electric torch at me, and motioned toward the door.

"You sleep in boathouse," she said flatly. "You through eating now. You go." And I said: "I take it you're tucking me in. Nighty-night, mammy," and went.

As I walked by the front of the house, I stopped for a second to stare in at the open windows. Sol-

veig wasn't there, nor Miguel. But Carla was, and so were Thorsson and Greyling. And Thorsson seemed to have clamped the lid back on the pot, for a time, at least, for the radio was on, and Carla was dancing to it, her fingers snapping like castanets, her skirts swirling and the lights catching that damned ruby at her throat, to set it flaming.

Thorsson was hunched in a chair watching her, his eyes lost beneath frowning brows, and Greyling was standing in front of the empty fireplace, a cigarette burning to ashes in his fingers. He was watching her, too. Two hungry dogs waiting to pounce on the same juicy bone.

"Did you ever watch murder being born?" Solveig had asked me. It seemed to me I was seeing it then. That I had been seeing it ever since I put foot on the island. Greyling had put it into words, there under the rhododendrons. Thorsson was giving it words now, by his very frowning silence, his iron control. Oh, there was trouble brewing on Mantrap, all right! Trouble as close and threatening as the gathering storm.

V.

It had turned into a pitch-black night with the fog thick from the lake and the heat pressing it down like steam.

Out in the southwest, the blackness was split by sharp white jags, but too far away for their light to pierce the darkness around me, and I turned on my torch, trying to pick out the path to the boathouse.

I found it, and I found Solveig in it, hiding in the shrubbery, waiting for me. She caught my sleeve and pulled me back where the bushes hid us. I'd turned off my torch, and I couldn't see her face, but I knew she was crying. The tears were thick

in her voice, and her shoulders were shaking. She had changed into something white and thin. It made her look younger, more frail. More childish and pitiful.

"I . . . I came out while you were in the kitchen, Dennis. I've been waiting for you. I'm scared! I'm scared to death. I saw them over the balcony—dad and . . . Steve and . . . her. I . . . I went down the back way, and came . . . out here. I couldn't . . . face them.

"There's something so . . . so terrible about the way they're acting, as though nothing had happened. Nothing, and all the time—I can feel it there—hate and . . . and something else, something awful! If only I hadn't lost my temper! If I hadn't said what I did! If—"

I covered her fingers with mine. I said: "Take it easy, kid. Take it easy. I saw them, too. I peeked in the window when I passed. Your stepmother was dancing, and Greyling and your dad were watching her. Everything under control. He probably thinks you're jealous and cooking up tales, and will give you a bawling out for it, and call it a day. I'd let him if I were you. It's wiser."

She shook my hand off. It wasn't only her shoulders that were shaking then. She was shaking all over.

"No one knows what dad thinks," she said dully, "but himself. And he doesn't tell until he's ready. You told me he had probably known what was going on all along. I think he has. And he will do something about it, all right. You wait and see.

"Carla doesn't know dad. She thinks because she is beautiful and he's mad about her, she can do anything and get away with it; that, because he is quiet and calm-voiced, he doesn't get mad, like other men. He doesn't. It's worse. He killed a peon once, down in Mexico. I was

only seven then, but I never forgot. It was for something the man had tried to do to my mother. Dad came in where mother and I were, and found mother screaming, and shot the man. And all he said was: 'Take Solveig out of the room, Emma, and quiet her.' And he sounded just like he did tonight, when he sent you to the kitchen and me upstairs.

"I tell you, I'm scared. And it isn't for Steve, nor Carla. It's for dad! What will happen to him, if he . . . if he— Oh, she's terrible, that woman; she's bad and slimy and evil! He'll kill her, and she isn't worth it! I'd do it myself, if I dared! I would! Maybe I will."

I caught her shoulders and shook the hysteria out of her. I said: "Shut up! Do you want someone to hear you? Murder is hot stuff, and you're playing with the idea too much for safety—or health!

"Go back to the house and get some food in your stomach and some sense in your head. If there's any killing done around here, let someone else do it—keep your own hands clean. And I doubt there'll be any. That stepmother of yours is wise. She isn't giving up her meal ticket for a white-collared, paid-by-the-month secretary. He'll be crawling back to you one of these days, a sadder and a wiser young man."

I knew Solveig's eyes were blistering me. I'd thought that little dig about Greyling would make her mad enough to forget her other terrors, and it had.

"If you think I'm just a fool girl bawling over a man who isn't worth bawling about—" she snapped. Then, too mad even to finish, she pushed me aside and ran for the house. I did the only thing left for me to do—found the path and went down to the boathouse.

What Solveig had told me about

her father wasn't making me feel any easier. A guy who's killed once, no matter what the reason, never finds it hard to kill again. Solveig was afraid he'd kill Carla. I wasn't thinking so much of that. But I was just as glad I wasn't in Steve Greyling's shoes that night.

The lightning was pretty sharp by that time, and leaving the path behind me, I could see the beach as I hadn't seen it before—a stretch of silvery sand, with the fishing boat upturned as Solveig said she had left it with its oars crossed on top of it.

What was it Solveig had said about an oarlock? Oh, yes—that she had taken them off, and that one of them had dropped in the sand. Would I find it and put it with the other? It took me a second or so, shooting my torch around, to spot it. I remember picking it up and standing with it in my hand, the heavy iron pin swinging from its rusted ring, and thinking it wouldn't be a bad plan to lift out its mate and take them both into the boathouse with me. Oil them and clean some of the rust off them.

I sure was to wish afterward that I had. But I didn't. Instead, I left it where Solveig had told me to, and climbed the narrow outside stairway to my second-floor room to switch on the unshaded ceiling bulb and stare around me.

To say Pete hadn't been much of a housekeeper was putting it mildly. The place looked like a pigsty and smelled like a third-rate saloon. Dirty clothes, dirty sheets on an unmade cot, beer bottles, whiskey bottles kicked into a corner.

What with the heat, that scene up at the lodge, and my talk with Solveig at the head of the path, I was nervous as a cat. I had to do something, so I did the first thing that offered itself—I went to work on

that room. I gathered up everything I could find that might belong to Pete and piled it all into a blanket that I'd spread on the floor. I even went down in the engine room and nosed out a half-emptied bottle of whiskey and a plug of chewing tobacco and a pair of rubber boots, and added them to the heap. And when I was through, I carried the mess down to the launch.

It wasn't so late, the storm was still a long way off, and as long as I had to put the launch under cover, anyway, I might as well run Pete's things over to the Cove and leave them with Lars to give to him. Whatever money the bum had coming to him, Mr. Thorsson could take care of the next day.

I turned off the lights in the boat-house before I left, but there was a searchlight at the end of the pier. I switched it on, and left it going. It didn't light the beach any, but it did cut a shaft out into the lake, and would mark the landing for me on my way back.

Just as I headed the launch around, I saw the excursion steamer on its way down from Lake City, and waited for it to pass. They were taking a chance with a storm coming, but I'd been around those summer hotels at Lake City enough to know it took a pretty bad storm to interfere with an evening party's plans. And this seemed to be a good-sized party, and a particularly hilarious one.

The boat couldn't have been over a hundred yards from me when it passed—so close that I could see the faces of the people crowding its rail, as the light from my beacon hit them.

It made such a pretty picture, with its own lights gleaming, and the passengers laughing and shouting, that I raced my motor at it, and

yelled, "Hi, Lake City! Having yourselves a time?" And waved at a yellow-haired girl, who was leaning over the boat and waving at me, her, "Hi, yourself, tall, dark and handsome," riding down to me.

I'd taken that evening ride so often myself that it was like saying "hello" to an old friend. It did me good. And, watching it until it had gone by, I saw a dark blob riding on the crest of the backwash, and thought: "Bet that yellow-haired dame that waved at me lost her hat," and laughed out loud.

It was cool on the lake, and the air was full of the sweet, clean smell of rain. I lifted my head and sniffed it in, and wished I'd told Solveig I was going, and brought her with me. And, suddenly, the peace of the night was gone and I was seeing Carla walking down those broad stairs, with that big red stone flashing on her white neck—seeing her dancing in a shadowy room, with two men watching her and eating her with their eyes.

"What a set-up!" I groaned. "What a set-up! Two men and a beautiful, scheming woman. A bitter, rebellious girl and a sullen, hating boy. Mix them up with a ruby worth a fortune, and add that flat-footed heathen Tonya for seasoning, and you've got as pretty a dish of trouble as any nightmare cook would want to brew. And you're in it, Denny, my lad, up to your damn fool neck!"

In it? I'll say I was in it before that night was over!

Lars Pedarson was just closing up his boathouse when I chugged in. He wanted to know what the Sam Tucket I was doing that time of the night, and with the Mantrap launch. Like the dumb cluck I was, I had to kid.

"Murdered the crown princess and swiped the jewels! Making my getaway. Stick 'em up!"

I'd forgotten he hadn't been on the wharf when Solveig had taken me over to the island; that he had been busy tailing Pete. But I remembered it quickly enough when I saw the old guy's eyes turn into needle points and his hand fly to his hip.

He was still sore as a boil, even after I'd told him what had happened and shown him Pete's things, to prove it, and I had to sit and gas with him quite a while before I could get him in a good humor again.

It had been that crack about the jewels that worried him. Probably every man, woman and child on the Cove knew about Carla's ruby. A good many of them had seen it, wearing it all the time, as she did. Stealing it wasn't a thing for a comparative stranger to boast about—especially not to the village constable.

We hunted around the taverns for Pete, and when we couldn't find hide nor hair of him, I left his bundle with Lars and started back to the island. By that time the storm, which had been only a threat a few hours before, had grown to be a grim reality. The lightning was almost overhead and the thunder an endless roar. That didn't bother me so much, but the wind was rising. And a wind on Lost Lake, as I've said, isn't a thing to be sneezed at when you've got to ride it out in a light boat like the Mantrap launch. I wasn't losing any time getting back. I made that motor give!

Something had gone wrong with the headlights. When I tried to turn them on they wouldn't work. But I didn't need them. The lightning that was playing hopscotch in the sky was headlight enough. I'd just keep the boat *sput-sputting* on

through the blackness, then a flash would come and show me the lake for miles.

It had been half past eleven when I left Lars. I'd set my wrist watch by the old Big Ben on his bench. I would have said it had taken Solveig and me three quarters of an hour to make the island on our trip over. I'd cut a good fifteen minutes off that, maybe more, when I picked up the Mantrap beacon and headed for it.

I was almost in, and had slowed down to take my bearings for the boathouse entrance, when suddenly the sky that had been black as pitch was split by the hottest flash of lightning I've ever seen. Not on and off like the other flashes had been, but a white, all-over-the-sky glare. As though the Lord of the storm, Himself, had put His finger on the master switch and was holding it there.

Afterward, when that memory was to mean so much to me, I tried to go back over that long-drawn-out second of breathless light and picture once more the things it had shown me. The pine tree on the ridge of the hill, with its ragged, jutting branch, and the scared bird flapping from it. The boathouse, like a carved skeleton with the water lapping under it. Bushes, weeds, enlarged, magnified, popping at me before the glare was gone, and rain like a smothering smoke was closing me in.

Those things were there, and I'll never forget them. But I really didn't see them, even then, except as a background for those other things that were of them, yet had no part with them. A human figure, shadowy, half-glimpsed, scurrying into the undergrowth of the hillside with something in its desperate haste of an unclean spirit, hiding from the

light that had picked it out. And on the beach that spread its glistening silver before me, another figure. Not running this one. Oh, not running! But sprawled beside an upturned rowboat, and still. So very, very still.

The next thing I remember, I was sending that launch head-on against the beach. Not hunting for the boathouse now—not even the wharf. Just driving it straight against the sand, and jamming it there. I remember hearing a crash and getting a jolt that threw me headfirst over the wheel and onto the sand, and knowing vaguely that I'd run into another boat that I couldn't remember being there when I'd left. But I wasn't bothering about that, then. I didn't even stop to turn the engine off; left her there tearing herself to pieces while I gathered myself up and started to where I'd seen that still, crumpled figure.

The wind had risen until it was like the roar of an express train, driving me before it through a solid sheet of rain. The physical effort it took to fight my way against it must have beaten some sense into me. Something did, anyway. For that was when I remembered, for the first time, Pete's flash, that Tonya had given me. And my hand went to the pocket of my cardigan with what I'm not ashamed to say was as fervent a "Thank you, Lord" as was ever lifted from the pews of a church.

That was when I found her. Carla. First, a slipped foot, half buried in the puddles of sand. White skirts, pushed down by the water, sand-logged and heavy, and my light shaking as it crept slowly, haltingly up, to rest at last on long strands of black, tumbled hair, and—on what once had been a face. It was nothing now but a mass of battered pulp,

that blood might have made easier to look at if the rain hadn't washed it clean even of that.

I took one look and closed my eyes.

I had seen death in the last few months—too much of it. Death as ghastly and as hard to look at as this, perhaps. But I never had seen murder. I was seeing murder now. The brutal murder of a woman who once had been Carla Mendez, and beautiful. And, through the gagging nausea that choked me, I was remembering that fleeing shadow on the hillside and thinking with a fierce relief that had no meaning to me, then:

"It was a man. It had to be! If it had been a woman I'd have seen her skirts!" And deep inside me I could hear a crazy, chanting rhythm forming itself into names:

"Thorsson, Greyling, Miguel. One of them killed Carla! One of them had to. Thorsson, Greyling, Miguel. Which?"

VI.

The wind and the rain, the pound of the waves, made a mad, incessant roar, but through it, and rising above it, I could hear a man's voice shouting: "Carla! Carla! Carla!"

I raised my own voice in an answering:

"Over here—here by the row-boat! Follow the shine of my flash! For God's sake! Quick!"

I had to try twice before I could make it anything but a croak, and my torch bobbed like a firefly in my shaking hand. That one glance I'd taken at what was left of a face had sure taken it out of me.

My light wasn't much good through that blinding downpour, but my voice must have carried and pointed out the way, for the echo of it was still on my lips when I heard

the slough of feet in the clinging sand, and Thorsson was beside me. He was carrying a flash, too, and our lights met to form a circle of rain-washed brilliance on that dreadful, white-clothed figure.

I had reached, by degrees, that battered pulp that had been a face. The shock had been a bad one, but it was leaving me now. But I got another, standing there watching Thorsson.

The man was made of wood! There wasn't a gasp out of him! Not a cry. And his eyes had gone straight to that awful face, as though knowing what he was going to find.

An iron control like that was too much for me, and I said brutally against it:

"Your wife, Mr. Thorsson—or what is left of her. Whoever did this did a thorough job. It . . . couldn't have been you by any chance, could it?"

If I'd expected to break him down, if I'd expected oaths, denials, I didn't get them. What I got made me want to gag again. And it wasn't meant for me at all; it was meant for that dead thing on the sand. For that first breathless second, I doubt if he even knew I was there.

"No mask to hide you now, Carla. As ugly out as in, aren't you? This is the way I'm going to remember you, so I'll never ache for you again."

And the look on his face when he said it! Glad, I tell you. Glad. The look of a man who had walked in hell and was free.

I yanked at his arm. I said, "Damn it, man! This is murder, and someone is going to burn for it. Crawl out of the ditch you're wallowing in, if you can, and take a hand here. You wouldn't let a dead dog lie out here in this storm. This

is a woman, and no matter how much you hate her, she's been your wife. Come on—we're taking her up to the house."

I was screaming now to make myself heard, and the circle of light that held us in seemed to be bounded by a wall of rain that pounded my words back on me. The sound of an outboard motor or a boat beaching at the wharf had about as much chance against the uproar as a child's rattle at a seven-eleven fire.

The first I knew of Lars Pedarson, he was there beside us, his own flash adding its ring of light to ours and the rain running in rivers off his oilskin hat, dripping from his straggly mustache and shining like yellow grease on his flapping slicker.

One look of those sharp eyes of his had told him all he wanted to know of the figure on the sand. He didn't waste any time on it. He was giving his all then—not to the dead woman, and not to Thorsson, but to me.

His eyes were hard as nails, and his voice was just as hard.

"Taught you some fancy tricks over there in France, didn't they? Didn't set well—the things you said yonder at the Cove, about killing the crown princess and all. Thought I'd kind o' like to follow you over here and see what's going on. Looks like I'd found plenty.

"Must 'a' had to work fast to do this since you beached just now—lessn you did it before you started for the Cove.

"You find her, Mr. Thorsson, or did he?"

I stared at him. I could feel my stomach turn and crawl inside me. A hell of a fix I'd got myself in! And I shouted before Thorsson could answer:

"I found her, you damned fool! I found her when I beached my boat

less than ten minutes ago, but I didn't kill her, if that's what you're thinking. I found her just as she is. If you want the killer, take a squint at Thorsson, and if you don't like what you see there, try up at the house. There's a couple more up there to choose from. And if you and Thorsson aren't going to help, I'll carry her up to the house myself. Get out of my way."

Lars' mouth twisted beneath its dripping mustache into a wry ghost of a grin.

"No use getting het up," he drawled. "You sort of laid yourself open, you know. And there ain't no use lugging her uphill in this wind, either, when there's the boat-house handy."

"We are carrying her up to the study," Thorsson said, his voice as flat as a board and as toneless. "And, if you don't mind, I think . . . I think I'd better lead the way."

"Maybe he's human, after all," I told myself grimly. I couldn't have touched that awful, mangled head, either. I left that to Lars, and it gave me a twinge of ugly pleasure to see his weather-beaten face go green as he lifted it.

He would try to pin this murder on me!

It was the first time any of us had actually touched her. Remembering that figure I'd seen scooting up the hill, I'd known what I would find, but I could hear Lars' puckered whistle, and saw his eyes widen as they flew to mine.

"Sure," I said. "She's still warm. If you'd been here ten-fifteen minutes ago, you'd have caught the murderer in the act. But it still wouldn't have been me." And, with me carrying her feet and Lars her shoulders, we started after Thorsson's pointing light, up that hilly, graveled path.

The second time that night I'd

climbed it. But I felt no surprise to be climbing it again, carrying a burden like this. It was as though I'd known all along it would happen. It had been as sure, as unescapable, as adding two and two and getting four.

The wind came more muffled now, hemmed in by bushes as we were, and the roofing branches broke the rain.

The sense of fragility Carla had left with me had come more from whiteness and perfection. She would have made a heavy load, even without the waterlogged clothes, weighted with the sand that clung to them. Ahead of me, I could hear Lars puff and cuss as he stumbled, and I had to brace myself when the limp body sagged back against me.

It wasn't a nice feeling. I was as glad as Lars was when we broke out of the path into the clearing at the top, and in spite of the fact that we were getting the fury of the storm again, as glad to stop for a minute and get my wind.

Thorsson didn't give us a chance to stop very long.

"This way," he said stiffly, and pointed to the right. There was a path there I hadn't noticed before. It swung around the clump of rhododendrons where I had seen Carla in Greyling's arms, and, following Thorsson along it, I found that it ended at the door of a small, unlighted cabin about ten feet or so beyond the bushes and connected by a walled and roofed-in passage leading to the rear side of the big lighted house beyond.

I was remembering then what Solveig had told me about the study she and her father and Greyling had built, even to the fireplace and the covered walk, so they could go back and forth to the house without getting wet.

Wet? That was a laugh. 'All

three of us were half drowned, and the water was pouring off that poor thing we were carrying.

Thorsson opened the door and switched on the lights. He pointed to a day bed at one end of the room. He said in that awful, flat voice, that made the shivers go down my spine, "Put her there—and, for God's sake, cover her face!"

I wasn't forgetting what I'd heard down on the beach, nor letting him forget.

"You're sure you've got all the gory details straight?" I asked silkily. "I wouldn't want to hide her face from you too soon, you know. Not when you were so anxious to remember it the way it looks."

For an instant no longer than a heartbeat, his eyes met mine. There was no shame in them, and no fear, but a misery that was like an open, bleeding wound.

"Thanks, O'Hara," he said quietly, "I'll remember." And he was the one who took the shawl from the back of the couch and laid it over her, while Lars looked from the one to the other of us, worrying his mustache with his teeth, as though he were straining his words through it.

"There seems to be talk going on I don't rightly understand. Mebbe it's best I tried. This island is out of my territory, you all know that. But seeing's how I happen to be here, and all the law you'll be able to get until this storm dies down, I'll have to do the best I can. We kind o' work together here on the border, you know; we have to. You seem to be the one who found her, son. Wish't you'd begin at the beginning and tell me about it."

The wind had grown to almost hurricane pitch, lashing at the shutters, rattling at the closed windows,

screaming around the overhanging roof. Not far from where we stood, heavy drapes covered an open doorway. "The door leading into the passageway," I told myself, and watched, my flesh prickling a little, as they swayed suddenly inward, as though a hand had pushed against them.

I was still watching them, fascinated, knowing that Lars was waiting for me, and wondering where I'd better begin my story, when we heard the scream.

A man's or a woman's? No one could have told, then. It had no sex. It wasn't even human—it was just terror given sound, and it was coming from somewhere behind those curtains!

It froze us all for a second, I think. Thorsson's eyes had gone to the couch, as though the sound might have come from there. Lars was still looking at me, his mouth still open on the words he'd meant to say. But my eyes and my thoughts had been on the curtained doorway when the scream had started, and I was the first to fling myself at it, and yank the draperies aside. Yet Lars wasn't so far behind me that he wasn't the one to jerk the figure that had been crouching beyond them to its feet and into the study.

Steve Greyling. I'd had a hunch he was there. I wasn't surprised. But that scream hadn't come from Steve. It had been too far away for that. It wasn't very long before we knew its source. Pounding feet down the narrow, dark hallway, and Miguel, his face as white as chalk, his black eyes so large they seemed to drown it, and that scream still trailing its terror behind him!

He stumbled through the opening, and stood for a minute swaying, gasping, before he could find his breath.

"Carla!" he stuttered. "Her . . . her ghost! I saw it—just now. It hadn't any body—just a face that . . . that laughed at me out of the shadows; a white face with streaming hair—laughing."

Lars had been hanging onto Greyling's arm. He let it go then, and swung on Miguel. I had to hand it to the old boy. He was quick on the uptake. Not much getting away from him!

"Her ghost, you say?" he snapped. "What made you think it was her ghost? How'd you know she was dead? Look at your clothes! You're soaked to the hide. How long have you been out in this rain? And just where were you?"

The boy stopped his mumbling then, and staring from us to that covered form on the couch, put an arm across his eyes. But when Lars pulled it away, the terror had faded a little against a sullen, black defiance.

"What if I have been out in the rain? I knew Thorsson was out looking for Carla. Why shouldn't I? She was my sister. I was . . . I was up on the bank above the beach when you found her. I was there when you carried her up to the house. I was scared and . . . and sick. I wanted to get in the house before anyone saw me. I went in the back door, the one that opens into the kitchen hall, and . . . and I'd just started upstairs, when there she was—just her face, hanging there in the darkness! Just her face without a body, and . . . and laughing at me! And all the time I knew she was dead—knew it, because I'd seen her face when you carried her by! She isn't dead! She'll never be dead. No one can kill her! She's a devil from hell, and she can't die! She—"

His voice was rising once more, with the bubble behind it a kettle

gives off before it comes to boil, and Lars, feeling another scream coming, gave a quick jerk at that shawl on the couch, so the thing it had so mercifully hidden lay bared in its dreadfulness with the light glaring down on it.

It was a brutal cure, but it did the business. The boy's hysteria died out in a strangled squeak, the sound a mouse gives when the trap closes on it.

I thought: "Here's where he passes out on us," and got ready to catch him. But he didn't. Just stood there, white-lipped, choking, his eyes never leaving the couch.

It was Greyling who did the fade-out. No one knew he was going, until he hit the floor with a thud.

I would have let him lie there. I hadn't much use for Greyling. It was Thorsson who snatched a decanter from a tray on his flat-topped desk and poured some brandy down him. And, knowing what Greyling had done to him, I thought he was being a lot more decent than I'd have been in his shoes.

That is, I thought so until I heard what he was saying:

"Not much left of the lips you kissed behind my back, is there, Steve? Not much left of the beauty you wanted—and had. But, what there is, is as much yours now as mine. Stand up and look."

Thorsson didn't lower his voice. He didn't seem to care whether Pedarson heard him or not. And Pedarson heard, all right. I wondered if he were still as certain I was the killer as he had been, but I didn't have a chance to ask him. For, by that time, Miguel was giving us all something new to think about, and it wasn't making things look any better for me.

I'd almost forgotten Miguel. I think we all had. He had left the

group that had gathered around Thorsson, and had gone to stand beside the couch. He was standing there when he threw his bombshell.

"The ruby!" he was crying. "The ruby! See? It isn't there! She was wearing it tonight as she always was, and now it's . . . it's gone!"

"I've killed the crown princess and swiped the jewels." The way I was remembering that gag of mine then told me clearly enough that Lars was remembering it, too, and I could feel those eyes of his going through me like a gimlet.

"O. K., wise guy," I told him. "I'm to be suspect No. 1. But don't forget there are a few other angles to this case that will bear looking into.

"And, by the way"—I don't know what had brought it back to me, but suddenly I was thinking of something I hadn't had time to remember before, and it was making my heart jump a little—"how many boats have you on the island, Mr. Thorsson? That fishing boat on the beach, the launch. Any others?"

"No, they are the only ones." Thorsson's mind must have been a million miles away, because you could almost see him jerk it back to answer me. "The fishing boat is out of commission. The new one I've ordered won't be delivered for a week. Why?"

I looked at Pedarson. I was enjoying this.

"I may be dreaming, constable," I grinned, "but I could swear that when I drove my boat onto the beach awhile ago, I rammed it head on into another one that someone had pulled up out of the water, and did a good job of smashing up both of them.

"Of course, I couldn't stop to investigate, seeing as how I had a killing to do. But we couldn't find Pete tonight, you know. He wasn't feel-

ing very friendly toward Mantrap when we last saw him, if you remember. And he knew about that ruby, too. Did you leave the key in your boat by any chance? He's probably on his way to Canada by this time, if you did."

I wasn't putting much stock in it myself. I couldn't even have sworn it had been a boat I'd crashed into. It was just a shot in the dark—a sly dig at Lars. But it went home, all right. He gave me one look, and was out of that cabin like a bat out of hell.

Lars didn't have any qualms about leaving us. We were as safe on that island as though he'd had us all behind lock and key. He'd find us when he got back, all right. But I, for one, meant to find some other place to wait for him than in that death-filled room. And I wasn't the only one with that idea, for before I could head for the curtained doorway, Greyling was before me. His face was the color of dry putty, and his mouth was trembling like a woman's.

I turned around to see if Miguel and Thorsson were following. They weren't. Thorsson had gone back to the couch and pulled the cover over Carla again. And he was saying to Miguel, with wonder and horror and pity all jumbled into his words:

"If you wanted that damn bauble badly enough for . . . this, Miguel, why didn't you tell me? I would have given you what you needed. You wouldn't have had to . . . kill for it."

I had to pull Miguel off him. Thorsson could have knocked him flat with one blow. He made no effort to. All he did was to shake himself, after I'd jerked the kid away, and nod toward the doorway.

"That leads to the living room.

We'll go in there. I'll send Tonya to stay with her."

There was a switch inside the curtains and he turned it on. A narrow passage ten feet long, perhaps, with another curtained opening at the farther end, and through it the sound of talking.

Greyling had gone on ahead without waiting for the rest of us, and it was his voice I recognized first, its shrill hysteria drowning the heavy gutturals that told me Tonya was with him.

"—standing there spouting your damn gibberish, pretending you don't understand! You understand, all right. You know she's dead. You knew it before I told you! Maybe you saw her ghost, like Miguel says he did! You'd be the one who'd see it, if anyone could.

"You didn't come down here just because you heard Miguel scream; don't think I'm believing that. You came down here because you knew she was dead and because you knew who killed her. Thorsson! And you know why. You heard that scene she staged here in this room tonight. There isn't anything said around here you don't hear—spying, sneaking, listening behind doors and curtains.

"Thorsson killed her. She taunted him into it—mocked him into it. You know she did, and so does Solveig. Solveig was here when it happened. She heard. She'll tell the truth. They're not going to pin this thing on me. I won't let them. I—"

Thorsson had been close behind me. He shoved me aside then, and pushed by me into the room.

"So, it's Solveig you're turning to now, is it?" he said thinly. "Hiding behind the skirts of the girl whom you lied to and deceived. True to a coward's colors—even there. And you, Tonya—" The woman was stir-

ring then, coming toward us, heading for the passageway; he stopped her, with his hand on her arm, pity softening the granite of his face and breaking for an instant through his iron self-control. "It isn't going to be easy for you, facing what that couch in the study holds. I am sorry for you. I hope you will believe me, when I say so. And I think . . . that . . . perhaps your mistress would rather have you see her now, and be with her, than anyone else this island holds.

"Go to her—and do what you think best. Your hands shall be the only ones to touch her.

"Miguel, I think I heard Pedarson coming. Solveig will be in her room, and he'll probably want to talk to her. She'll have to know of this sooner or later. It might as well be now. I wish you would call her down."

Miguel started for the stairs, and stopped, to stare up into the shadowy darkness of the balcony overhead, with everything in him crawling against it.

Miguel's little sketch of what he had been doing when we found Carla's body had sounded pretty fishy to me. And there were times afterward when I was to see "murderer" in him, plainly enough. Then, I couldn't see anything but a scared kid, afraid of the dark and of the ghosts with which his too-taut nerves had already peopled it, and I said:

"Keep your shirt on, kid, I'll go with you," and went over to him.

The balcony was unlighted, with the lights from the living room, tossing their own shadows upward to join the shadows that lurked there, making them seem still darker, still thicker.

I wasn't looking for ghosts—not like the kid behind me, who was all

but hanging on my jacket. But my nerves weren't made of iron, like Thorsson's, and when I saw a shadow deeper than the rest, take form in front of me, and grow a face, and a long white body with something like ectoplasm streaming from it, I all but yelled myself.

It was only Solveig, coming down to meet us. The white body was a woolly robe—the sort girls wear on beaches—and the ectoplasm was a towel! She must have been drying her hair with it, for her red-gold curls were mussed into damp ringlets that clung childishly to her face.

I swallowed a lump in my throat that might have choked a horse, and said, trying to break the news of what had happened as gently as I could:

"Your father wants to see you, Solveig. There's . . . there's been an accident to . . . to Carla. She's—"

"Dead," Solveig finished for me. "Sure, I know, Dennis. I've been up here listening. I heard."

If she had heard that much, she'd heard other things, too. I wondered how much, and what she was going to do about it. She didn't keep me wondering long.

Miguel and I had backed aside to let her by. Her bathrobe was short, and her brown legs showed beneath it. She was wearing some old scuffed-out moccasins.

Remembering that other woman I'd seen descending those stairs such a few short hours before, breathtaking in her beauty, regal, with her great ruby gleaming at her throat, I wanted to pick this poor kid up in my arms and run away with her, for that wet hair of hers was shouting its own tell-tale story, without any words from her.

Solveig hadn't been safe in her room while Carla was being murdered. She'd been out in the rain,

too. She was walking straight into hell, and she knew it. For I'd caught the look in her face when she passed me.

In France, I had watched young boys, hardly out of their teens, taking their fighting planes up; I had watched troops going out against the armored tanks that were pounding down on them—and I had seen the faces of the men. I knew that look and what it meant.

I hadn't admitted I was in love with Solveig Thorsson before. I hadn't even thought of it. I didn't admit it then; I just accepted it. And went along so close beside her that we were standing shoulder to shoulder when she reached Greyling and her father at last.

Solveig wasn't asking any quarter from anyone—nor giving any. Her first words made that clear.

"No one is hiding behind my skirts, dad," she said clearly. "You, nor Steve, nor anyone. I'm not trying to hide behind my own.

"I know what's happened to Carla. I knew it the minute I heard Miguel scream. I was taking a bath, and I put on my robe and ran out to the gallery and hid. I was there behind the hangings when Steve and Tonya were talking. She is dead. She's been killed. And I'm glad.

"You could have killed her. Steve could have killed her. Miguel. I could have done it myself. We all wanted to, everyone of us. I've wanted to a hundred times, and never more than I wanted to tonight.

"She called you a stupid old fool, dad, and laughed at you. She said you were an old man trying to be young, and the very sight of you made her sick. She laughed at you and spit her ugliness out at you, with me right here in this room, listening, and so ashamed for you that I wanted to die myself. She—"

The door had banged open, bringing rain and the roar of the wind, but bringing something else as well. A something that made me snatch at Solveig's arm and shake her into a startled silence.

"Wait!" I warned. "Let it go for a while. There's Pedarson, and he's got Borsch with him. Carla's ruby is gone, you know, and Borsch was here when it happened. See what he's got to say."

Pete looked like a drowned rat, water pouring off him, his bleared eyes blinking, his face ashen with fright. I didn't blame him much for that. Lars had a gun that must have dated back to the '60s, jabbed in his ribs. It looked like a cannon to me, and it probably felt like one to Pete.

Lars' glance went to me, and his voice was the only dry thing about him.

"Thanks to your tip, son, I found this guy in the boathouse engine room, trying to file down a key so it would fit my boat, seeing as how it's the only one left on the island that'll run.

"You did a good job on the launch. The engine's burned out, and the boat you rammed it into is splintered into kindling. And, by the way, Mr. Thorsson, I picked up an oarlock in the sand beside that fishing skiff of yours. I thought"—he stopped a second, and when he spoke again, his drawl was slower than ever—"I thought that the one who used it on your wife might like to know I'd found it."

That oilskin slicker Lars was wearing had pockets that must have reached to the top of his boots. I thought his hand would never get to the bottom and out again. But it did.

Solveig screamed and covered her eyes. I heard Miguel retching. I

didn't wonder. I'd been sick when I found Carla. I was almost as sick again, seeing that piece of iron, with its long strand of coal-black hair, wrapped around it and woven through it like a snake.

The rain and sand that had ruined any fingerprints the iron might have shown hadn't been able to wash murder from it. That strand of Carla's hair was screaming murder like a living thing.

God in heaven! No wonder her face had been mashed into pulp, with that piece of iron slamming down on it!

Lars stared at the wet, draggled group around him. Miguel's sickness had passed, to leave him shivering, his lips blue. The rest of us weren't much better.

"You folks better get them wet clothes off you. We got plenty of time to thresh this thing out afterward. Lost Lake's on a rampage. No use my trying to get back to the Cove before it goes down. And if I got over, there's nothing I could do but call the Lake City police, and they'd be as bad off as me.

"No. I'm here and I'm staying. And after you're dried off, we'll try and get to the bottom of this mess, if we can.

"Don't mind my putting a light to them logs in the fireplace, do you, Mr. Thorsson, so the rest of us can steam out a bit? And mebbe Pete would show me where you keep your wood. We're going to need more of it soon."

Pete had been doing a lot of under-the-breath mumbling that no one had listened to. As Thorsson and Greyling, with Miguel close behind them, started their dreary procession up the stairs, Pete's mumbles stopped, turned into a surly growl.

"Take that damn blunderbuss out of my ribs, can't you? As soon try

to walk with a big Bertha stuck in my back! If you hadn't jumped me the way you did down at the boat-house, frisking me for a ruby I didn't have, and trying to pin a murder on me I didn't do, if you'd given me a chance to talk, 'stead of doing all the talking yourself, I could 'a' told you who done the killing. I saw the murderer. It was a woman in a bathing suit. And there's only two women on this island it could have been.

"One of 'em is back there in the cabin, dead. The other— Ask that kid over there what she was doing when O'Hara sent his boat into mine. Maybe that'll give you something to chew on for a while, you walrus-faced, hick cop, you!"

VII.

Thorsson, Greyling and Miguel had disappeared up the stairs. Solveig had lagged behind the rest and was still close enough to hear Borsch. She turned back and came straight to him. Her chin had the same square set and her eyes the same angry flash they'd worn at the Cove. And her tongue the same bitter lash.

"You lying, sneaking scum! I wasn't even near the beach when Dennis brought the launch in, and you know I wasn't."

I said: "Of course, you weren't, Solveig! Lars knows that. Don't pay any attention to this guy—he's just sore and trying to get even. The drunken bum hasn't hurt you any; all he's done is to give me an alibi."

Borsch had given me an alibi for the killing, all right, but I wasn't thinking much about that. I was too busy remembering that figure I'd seen running up the side of the hill. And how glad I'd been that it hadn't

worn skirts! But—a girl in a bathing suit? That was another thing altogether, and my stomach was squirming again.

If Solveig had been wearing one, a lot of good my story was going to do her! I had to find out, and find out quick, before Lars started pumping me.

"Far from me to be offering any suggestions, constable," I grinned. "But it doesn't take two people to bring in a log or two of wood. I'd get them myself, if I knew the house as well as Pete. Why don't you send him for them? And maybe if you'd go back to the cabin and go over the corpse a little more carefully, you might find that ruby on her—down in her clothes somewhere. Just a suggestion, like the one I gave you about Pete. But see the prize that brought you."

Pete didn't lose any time heading for the kitchen. I had a hunch he wouldn't. Probably he knew where Thorsson kept his whiskey as well as he knew where he kept his wood, and he'd manage to take on a load of both before he got back.

Lars hesitated for a minute, debating whether to go after him or not; started, changed his mind, and disappeared through the curtains that led to the cabin.

Solveig was standing where she had been all along, but her eyes turned now to the fire. She hardly seemed to know I was there. I waited until I was sure Lars wouldn't change his mind again before I dared to speak, and when I did, I kept my voice down to a whisper. No telling who might be looking or listening. I had the feeling of eyes all around me, and ears at every crack.

"Solveig! Don't look at me. Keep your voice down when you answer. You were wearing a white dress

when I saw you out there on the path tonight. A white dress with long skirts. Did you change it afterward to a bathing suit?"

She had kept her voice down as I had warned her. It was low and soft and husky, but each word sounded as loud as the wind's roar to me.

"Yes. It was after that fight here in the living room. I . . . I went upstairs and tried to forget it, and I couldn't. I couldn't stand the house. I couldn't stand anything. I put on my bathing suit and went down to the beach. I . . . I thought maybe you'd be there, and I could talk to you, and then I'd swim for a while and be able to sleep. The boathouse was dark, and the launch gone, so I lay down behind the rowboat on the sand. I was there when . . . when Carla and Steve came down. They didn't see me, and I heard things. Oh, Dennis—the things they said! The awful things!"

"Never mind what they said!" I snapped. "It's the bathing suit I'm worrying about. Good Lord, kid, didn't you hear Borsch say he saw a woman with a bathing suit on, down by the rowboat after Carla was killed, after my boat came back?"

"He didn't see me," Solveig said stiffly, "because I wasn't there." Then, at something she must have seen in my face, her eyes widened, and the dullness went out of them.

"What is it, Dennis? What's the matter? You look scared. What is it?"

"I *am* scared," I told her. "I'm scared for you. Because Borsch isn't the only one who saw someone on that beach tonight. I did. I thought it was a man. But it could have been a woman wearing a bathing suit, Solveig. And Lars mustn't think it was you. Listen now—there isn't

any time to lose. Did anyone see you change and go down to the beach? Did anyone see you when you came up again?"

She knew what I was getting at now. She was scared, all right, but it wasn't getting her. You could feel her going back over things, checking on them, making sure.

"I came down the back stairs and out the back way. There wasn't a soul around. Tonya was in her room. I heard her as I passed. I went down a short cut to the beach. I didn't even pass the house. And instead of walking to the boathouse, I dived off the rocks and swam up. I knew you weren't there as soon as I saw the launch gone, so I just went over behind the rowboat and lay down. I think I went to sleep. I must have—for Carla and Steve weren't there when I came up, and they were, when I awakened. They—"

"Oh, now, listen, kid," I groaned. "Forget *them*! When you went back to the house— How about it then? Anyone see you? Think!"

"No," she said positively. "Not a soul. I came back the same way I went, except I didn't go in the kitchen side. I came in through here, and straight upstairs to my room. I was upset . . . and . . . and . . . crying. I cried a long time. Then I took off my bathing suit and had a shower, and was drying my hair when I heard that awful scream of Miguel's, and . . . came out to the balcony rail. I thought maybe someone was killing Carla then, and I wouldn't have stopped them. I wouldn't have cared."

I could hear Pete's heavy boots in the kitchen. I knew Lars would be coming any minute.

"That bathing suit up in your room?" I snapped. "O. K.—get up there and hide it. Wrap it up—stick it somewhere. See no one

finds it. The first chance you get, slip it to me. I'll take care of it. If you have to tell you were down on the beach tonight, tell it, but whatever else you tell, remember you weren't wearing a bathing suit. You were wearing skirts. Skirts, get it! Skirts!"

She wouldn't move, at first. I had to swing her around toward the stairs and push her. And even then, she stopped.

"You aren't asking me if I killed Carla, Dennis," she said softly. "Why don't you?"

I'm not pretending to understand women. Solveig was woman enough to know I'd fallen pretty hard for her, or I wouldn't have been so keen on spending my summer at Mantrap. Maybe she was thinking of that, then—young, scared, lonely, wanting someone to trust her for herself, and tell her so. But there wasn't time for that. I wanted her on her way and doing the things I'd told her to do. If I had to be brutal, O. K.—I'd be brutal.

"Do you know how Carla was killed? She was killed with that oarlock Pedarson showed you. Not one blow, but a dozen of them, until her face looks like a piece of raw tomato. It's not a face—it's a pulp. I'm not asking you if you did a thing like that. But Lars is going to, if Borsch puts you down on that beach in a bathing suit, and you let him get by with it. Now, get going. And make it snappy!"

God knows I thought I was doing what was best to help her; thought I was doing the one thing that would keep the finger of guilt from pointing to her. How was I to know that it was about the worst thing I could have done?

Borsch was entering the room from one side by that time, and Lars from the other.

Lars nodded at Solveig. There was a gruff kindness in his voice, but the law was there, too.

"Changing into some clothes, Miss Solveig? Mebbe you'd best. But don't take too long. And tell your pa and them others that I'm waiting."

Borsch put his logs down beside the fireplace. He backed up against the blaze. His clothes steamed. He smelled like a wet dog. Or rather, a wet dog might have smelled like Pete, if it had been a drunken dog. And the look he gave me wasn't a friendly one.

"Wise guy, eh? Smart guy? O. K., I gave you an alibi for the killing. So what? I didn't give you one for the ruby stealing, did I? You found the dame, didn't you? You had plenty of chances to find that stone, too, and to hide it afterward. You ain't no better than I am. And as for that hellcat of a Thorsson girl—I've got both of you where the hair is short, and don't you forget it!"

If I hadn't seen that figure running away from the beach myself, I would have told Pete he was a liar, and shrugged it off. But I had. It had looked like a man to me. If I could put Solveig into skirts and keep her in them, I could tell Lars about it and make him believe it. At least it would be my word against Pete's. And it didn't take much conceit to think that even Lars would give me the edge there.

I didn't have much chance to stew over it, though, for the room was filling up again. Miguel first, then Solveig and her father together, with Steve a step or two behind. If they'd been talking upstairs, there wasn't any talk in them now. But Solveig sent me a look that told me she'd taken care of that bathing suit, and I felt easier inside.

She was wearing the same dress she had worn at dinner, her damp, red-gold curls brushed out and tied with a ribbon.

She wasn't any murder suspect then. She was just a sweet kid, scared.

Maybe we were all a little scared. The law can do that, even to an innocent guy. And to old Pedarson, none of us was innocent, and he was letting us see it. We were all crowded around the fireplace, as though it were the only friendly thing in the room.

I pulled up a small sofa and motioned Solveig into it and sat down beside her. Thorsson had his own chair, and Greyling had found another. Miguel leaned against the fireplace and bit his nails, and Borsch had been shoved out to the side by a dig of Pedarson's elbow.

I gave a nervous chuckle, the way Lars took his stand where he could face us all, with the light flashing off that constable's badge of his.

The law! The smell of that was as strong in the room as the whiskey on Pete's breath.

It was in his voice, too, slow-drawled, quiet as always, but with a thread of steel running through it.

"While you folks changed upstairs, I was in there." A jerk of his thumb showed us where "there" was, plainly enough. "It wasn't nice—the thing I saw. Murder ain't ever nice, I guess, but it ain't always as nasty as hers.

"There's a police force up at Lake City—a coroner and a fingerprint man, people like that. If this was being done as it should be, they'd be here. And they will, soon's the lake goes down, and I can get word to them. But, till they come, I'll carry on. I don't claim no big knowledge, but I've been around dead folks



*Miguel stumbled through the opening and stood there swaying.
"Carla!" he gasped. "Her ghost. I saw it just now—laughing!"*

enough to know that the dead don't bleed.

"The blow that killed your wife, Mr. Thorsson, was on the back of the head, over the ear. It bled. Not much, but the blood is clotted in it. The others, the ones that bashed her face, they came afterward. And she was dead when she got 'em. Must 'a' took a lot of hate to mash the face of a dead woman.

"Mrs. Thorsson was a right pretty woman when she was alive. I've seen her over at the Cove. Fair took

a man's breath to look at her. She ain't pretty any more. Looks to me like someone wanted to spoil them looks of hers, and didn't care how they done it.

"Her locket and chain are gone, too, but we'll forget them for a while. There's other things seem more important to me."

Locket and chain! I wanted to laugh at that. A ruby worth fifty thousand dollars strung on a chain that was priceless in itself, and it might have been a piece of costume

jewelry, for all it meant to Lars! But he had turned to Thorsson, and I caught my breath in quick listening.

"Mr. Thorsson, suppose we begin with you. And first, I might's well tell you that Pete's done a lot of talking. We folks at the Cove know a lot about the going's on at Mantrap that you mightn't think we know. That's what Miss Solveig here fired Pete for—if she didn't tell you. I gather there was a little trouble between you and your wife over Greyling. That so?"

Greyling's face was twitching, and his fingers were shaking over a cigarette they couldn't light, but Thorsson was like a piece of the rock he'd spent his life digging in.

"That's all in how you judge quantities, Pedarson," he said quietly. "My wife was Greyling's mistress, if that means anything to you. She boasted about it tonight, standing almost where you are. She threw it in my face. She called me a blind old fool and a coward, because she knew I'd seen it and was too afraid of losing her to do anything about it but take the bits she tossed me.

"She called me a— But you wouldn't know that word; it's Mexican for cuckold. And it isn't a word that one peon calls another, if he wants to live very long. And she laughed when she said it. Sneered it at me, and laughed.

"You asked me if there was a 'little' trouble between me and my wife. That answers you, doesn't it, constable?"

"It answers me." Pedarson's voice was sober. "It answers me too well, mebbe."

The rain had stopped a little, but the wind was at hurricane peak, and the pound of Lost Lake against the Mantrap rocks was a thunder that never stopped. But, loud as it was,

it wasn't loud enough to pierce the silence of that tight little group in the lighted room.

It took a crash from somewhere in the shadows of the gallery above to do that. To jerk us, edgy and raw with nerves, into a tense, startled listening, and to hold us there, faces lifted, eyes seeking out that upper gloom.

Thinking of it afterward, I knew Tonya must have been up to a little private listening behind those passageway curtains, or she couldn't have heard that racket upstairs and been in the room with us so quickly. But then she was there, padding on those bare, flat feet of hers, and heading for the stairs.

"Someone leave windows open," she grumbled. "Wind blow t'ings over. I feex."

I could hear Miguel's choked-back gasp, and the creak of Greyling's chair as he sank heavily into it. And from Solveig, on the sofa beside me, there came a hysterical giggle that didn't sound very safe. She'd done such a good job of keeping herself in hand that I wasn't letting her go to pieces now. I grabbed her hand and squeezed it so hard it must have hurt plenty, and jumped into that silence with the first thing that popped into my head.

"It's a pretty strong wind that can blow furniture down in a house like this, Lars. How about that boat of yours? Wouldn't want anything to happen to it. Might need it to make a quick getaway myself, before the law closes in on me."

"It's under shelter, where it ought to be," Lars snapped. "I've got the key. And what's more, I've fixed the engine so no one's making a getaway till I say so. You nor no one else."

Lars wasn't in any mood for kidding, and I hadn't helped my case

any. But Solveig's nervous giggling had stopped, and her fingers had tightened around my hand in a quick, grateful pressure.

By the time Lars had turned to Thorsson again, I knew that she could take whatever came.

Lars was a Swede, but he had been born and bred in Canada and he had soaked in a lot of British tenacity and bulldog stubbornness.

"Guess you'd best tell me where you were tonight, Mr. Thorsson. Say between the time you and your wife had this . . . fuss you spoke about and the time I found you with her down on the beach.

"I'd like it if you'd tell the truth. But there ain't no way I can make you, I guess."

"There isn't any way I can prove I'm telling the truth," Thorsson said slowly. "But I'm telling it, anyway, believe it or not.

"That 'fuss,' as you call it"—his lips twisted wryly at that—"took place here in this room. It had its start before dinner, when Solveig came back from the Cove, bringing O'Hara with her, and told us why she had got rid of Borsch. It was like . . . like a fire that smolders and smokes before it begins to burn. It smoldered and smoked through dinner, and for a long time afterward.

"It was my—" He had started to say "my wife," and the words had stuck. "It was Mrs. Thorsson who fanned it to a blaze at last. She had been in a wild mood all evening. Dancing, laughing, taking sharp digs at all of us, and watching us squirm. And, finally, she . . . she stood where you are, Pedarson, facing us all, and let go.

"It was like taking the lid off a sewer and watching the blackness and filth boil out.

"Miguel had gone to his room as soon as dinner was over, but Greyling was here, and Solveig. I have told you some of the things she said. They will tell you the rest, if you want to know. I stood it as long as I could. Then I told Solveig to go to her room, and I went through that passage into the study. And stayed there.

"You don't have to ask me what I did there. I'm going to tell you. There is a gun in my study. You'll find it in the top drawer of my desk. I was sitting there playing with it. Sitting there in the dark, turning it around and around in my hand, and wondering who needed the bullets in it worse—Carla, Steve or myself.

"I thought about it for quite a while, and then I decided I'd get them both into that room with me and make them draw for it. And—well, that's about all, except that I went to find them.

"I came back here to the house first. There wasn't anyone here but Tonya, and she was shut in her room. I knew there was a rain coming, and they'd be back in, and I could wait for them. But the thing that was in me then wasn't waiting.

"I went after them—after Carla and Steve. I didn't care about the rest. I hunted through the yard and around the house, and then I started down to the beach. It wasn't raining then, or if it was I didn't feel it. It wasn't until that awful flash of lightning came that it really began to storm, and I started calling Carla's name and then someone answered me and waved a torch.

"I thought it was Greyling at first. It wasn't. It was O'Hara. He was there beside her kneeling over her when I found her or, rather, what there was left to find.

"I loved my wife. I still love her

—strange as that may sound to you. If I had killed her, I would have given her a cleaner death. But there's a devil in me that's glad she died as she did, with her beauty gone, because wherever she is I know that is the one thing that could hurt her most.

"I think I told her so down there on the beach. O'Hara would remember that. I think I told her that was the way I wanted to remember her. It is. It's the way I want Steve to remember her. Always. And I think—yes, I think he will."

The rock of his control had broken a little when he had said he had loved Carla. That he still did. But then it froze again. All but his eyes. What those eyes were saying to Steve Greyling was going to live with that guy as long as his memory of the awful thing back there in the studio that once had been a woman and his love. And that would be forever.

Thorsson had made things look pretty black for himself. I couldn't figure what Lars was thinking, chewing at his rag of a mustache, twiddling at his constable's badge with his big, blunt fingers, and his eyes lost beneath the thatch that roofed them. As for me, I thought Thorsson had told the truth; that is, I thought so then. And I could see Solveig did. There was a proud, pitying loyalty behind the look she gave her father that spoke louder than words.

Greyling was the next on the mat. Lars was one of the old-time school. He hadn't much use for men who play around with other men's wives. It was plain from the very first, he didn't intend to handle Stephen Greyling with tongs. His voice was sharp and his eyes were cold gray shafts of dislike, disgust and suspicion as he turned them on Greyling.

VIII.

"And you, young feller"—Lars' voice was like a bombshell—"where were you when all this was going on? You've got a lot of explaining to do. You'd best get about it."

Steve was too near the breaking point to control himself as Thorsson had. There was shame in the words that came tumbling out, but there was anger, too, with fear tying them together like a slimy thread.

"You think I killed her! Thorsson wants you to. He'll try and make you. I didn't! Why would I? It isn't the man who loves a woman and has her who kills her. It's the one who loves her and has lost her. Do you think I could have murdered her the way she was murdered? Made a horror of the lips that had kissed mine?"

"Thorsson did it, I tell you! He had murder in his heart; he has said so. He had the chance and the hate. He was the one who would want to spoil her beauty, not I. That beauty was mine. She had given it to me. Not for the money I could pay for it, but for love.

"She—"

I felt Solveig stir beside me, gather herself together. But I was too late to pull her back before she was on her feet, beside her father's chair, her head high, her blue eyes as cold as the constable's own, and as hard.

"You're forgetting something, Steve," she said quietly. "You're forgetting what happened down on the beach tonight. You're forgetting that Carla was finished with you as well as with dad. And that she told you so!"

"Perhaps you'd better ask me, Constable Pedarson, where I was tonight. Maybe my story had better

come first. It will keep Steve from piling lies on murder."

Greyling tried to break in. Pedarson barked: "Shut up!" out of the corner of his mouth, and nodded at Solveig, waiting.

We all waited, but my eyes had caught Solveig's for a short instant and flashed my warning to her. That bathing suit of hers was riding me then, like a hag out of hell. If only she'd have the sense to keep herself out of it!

If she got my signal, her face didn't show it, and her eyes went straight to Pedarson's and stayed there. They never swerved again until she had finished.

"After that scene dad told you about, after dad had gone to his study. I went upstairs, the way he said. I'd have gone before, but I couldn't leave dad. I don't know what I was thinking up there in my room; I guess the same thing dad was thinking, only I didn't want to see anyone killed but her. I'd have done it myself, if I'd known how. Down here in the living room, with all them looking at me. I wanted to.

"I stayed in my own room until I couldn't stand it any longer. I could feel the evil of her clear up there. So I—"

For an instant she hesitated. I tell you my heart stopped beating, and when it started again it was like a hammer pounding against my ribs! I'd been so sure she was going to tell about that bathing suit that it's a wonder I didn't shout at her. She didn't. And her hesitation had been so short, that I don't think even Lars noticed it.

"I thought I'd go down to the beach. There's a path that's shorter than the one on the hill. We don't use it often, because it's rocky and hard to climb. It's easy going down, though, if you know the way. I took

it. It comes out this side of the hill path, and not far from where the . . . the rowboat is.

"It was dark, but I saw the shadow of it there and threw myself down behind it. I was tired, and it was dark and quiet, and it felt good being alone. I sat down, sort of stretched out on the sand, and I think I went to sleep.

"Steve and Carla weren't on the other side of the boat when I lay down. No one was there. But when I wakened, they were. It was the sound of their voices that wakened me. They must have come down the hill path and stopped on the other side of the boat, or they'd have seen me.

"At first, when I realized who it was, I meant to get up and go away. And then I didn't. I listened.

"They must have been talking for a long time before I heard them, for Carla was standing up, getting ready to go, and I peeked a little over the boat, and Steve was down on his knees, holding at her skirts and crying. And talking through it—crying and talking together. He—"

She stopped there. Her eyes didn't leave Lars', but her lips began to tremble. I knew how she was feeling. The picture she was drawing was making me about as sick as it was making her.

Lars' heavy prompting showed he wasn't liking it, either.

"Guess you'll have to tell what he said, Miss Solveig. It won't be easy, I know. But I'd like you to tell it as near the right words as you can."

"Oh, I can give you the right words," Solveig answered. "It isn't hard for me to remember them. Steve was saying: 'You can't do this to me, Carla! You can't! I won't let you! You can't go away now and leave me here like an old shoe you've

worn and kicked aside! You're just saying it because you like to see me crazy. Because you like to see what you can do with me! I've wanted to take you away—I've wanted to all along. I've begged you to go. We'll go together—you and I. We'll make a new life somewhere and be happy. I love you and you love me. You've told me so.'

"Oh, there was more. Lots more. The things they'd done together, Steve and Carla—said to each other. I'm not telling them. I won't. And she just stood there all the time he was saying them, looking at him as though he were a dog, and when he had finished, she . . . she spit on the ground, like Tonya does, when she hates something.

"She said: 'Love? Why you weak-kneed fool! When I love, it will be a man. Someone who's got the same devil in him I've got in me. Maybe he'll kill me or I'll kill him, but at least we'll know what love means.' She said: 'Tonya and I are leaving this island as soon as we can pack our things and go. And I never want to see it, or anyone on it again. That old man up at the house, with his rock for a face, you and your baby whining, Miguel thinking he can get my ruby from me. Solveig—I'm sick to death of all of you. God in heaven, can't you understand that? Sick! Get out of my sight and stay out—and leave me alone!' That's what she said, Mr. Pedarson. You wanted the right words. I've given them to you."

I looked at Greyling. His head was down, and his hands were clenched until the knuckles shone white in the firelight. They were still clenched when Lars turned to him, but his head came up with a jerk. He made me gasp. He looked ten years older than Thorsson.

"Well?" Lars asked him. "You

heard Miss Solveig. Is it true?"

And Steve said, "Yes." There wasn't anything else he could have said, not with that face to answer for him.

But Lars hadn't finished with him. Not Lars. I had seen a peasant once, in France, hightailing it before the Hitler putsch. He'd been driving a mule, packed with his household stuff, and prodding the poor frightened thing with a pitchfork at every step. Lars made me see that old guy so plainly that I was almost wincing at the prick of the fork myself.

"And you!" he flung at Greyling. "After she told you to leave her, what did you do? Go—or stay and kill her?"

That was the first time Steve had looked at Solveig—straight at her. Scared? He was so scared he was green!

"You know I left, Solveig! You know I left without touching her! You say you were there. You *were* there. You must have seen me go! You've told him everything else, why don't you tell him that? It's true. You know it's true!

"And besides, Borsch says it was a woman he saw beside the . . . the body by the rowboat. I heard him say so when I was going up the stairs. He—"

I'll give the man credit. I think he was too crazy with fear for himself to realize just what he was doing to Solveig. For he stopped so suddenly he choked on his words.

I was boiling, hopping mad. I said: "You low-lived, yellow-livered coward!" and lunged to my feet, my fists ready to land a sock.

Lars yanked me back. He was off on a new tack now, and seemed willing to let Steve stew in his own juice for a while.

"What time was it, Greyling, when

you and Mrs. Thorsson met down there on the beach—near as you can tell?”

Steve shrugged. What I had called him must have bitten in a little. He was sullen, his back up against us all.

“How in hell would I know what time it was? You heard Solveig tell what Carla had said to me. A man who’s just been kicked off like a mangy cur doesn’t stop to look at his watch to see the time.”

There was a clock on the mantel above the fireplace. As though it wanted its part in things, it chimed then, and every eye flew to it. One o’clock. It didn’t seem possible. I doubt if there was anyone in that tense, still group to whom that hour since we had found Carla’s body on the beach hadn’t seemed a lifetime.

The clock had a hard, shrill tone, like a woman’s brittle laughter, and Thorsson’s lips twisted to it.

“Maybe I can help you there,” he said slowly. “I can’t tell you how long my friend and my wife”—the way he said that must have made Greyling squirm—“were together on the beach, but I can tell you when I left them here in this room. The clock was striking when I went through the door to the study. It was half past ten then. It was in my study close to an hour, for when I came back here looking for them, it was twenty minutes after eleven. Do you know when you went down to the beach, Solveig? That might help.”

Solveig shook her head. “Not the time, but I was back and in my room when you came looking for Carla. You thought I wasn’t there because there wasn’t any light. I was lying across my bed, crying. I didn’t want to see you.

“And you, Steve—you left before I did, if that’s what you want me to

say. And Carla laughed you out of sight, didn’t she? Laughed so hard she had to sit down against the boat, and hold her sides.

“I left her laughing. She never heard me go.”

“You mean you went without saying anything to her? Without letting her know you’d been there?” Lars was trying to reason that out and it didn’t make sense to him.

“That don’t sound right to me, miss, if you don’t mind my saying it. You’ve got a real good tongue in your head. I heard you with Pete, you know. Over at the Cove we all know that you and Greyling have been planning on marrying. Seems like a girl who’s engaged to a man, would want to say something to the woman who’d taken him away from her. Might have found quite a bit to say.”

“I had plenty to say,” Solveig began fiercely, “not about what she’d done to Steve—or me—but about what she’d done to my father! And I would have said it, only—” The rush of her words stopped then. Ended in a startled, choked stammering, and a dull, “Only I . . . didn’t. I . . . I went away.”

I wasn’t the only one who had seen her eyes fly to Miguel, in that fraction of an instant her words had faltered. Lars had, as well.

The boy was sitting humped forward in his chair, his black eyes burning, his lips twisting around talk that seemed to want to come and couldn’t. He must have felt us looking at him, for his shoulders straightened and his words, when they came, had a dignity and a pride about them that Greyling’s had lacked.

“You needn’t mind, Solveig. I’d have told, anyway. I’m not like Steve. I’m not asking you to shield me.

"Solveig didn't say anything to Carla, Constable Pedarson, because she didn't have time. Because I was there!

"That quarrel up in the living room—I wasn't upstairs the way they thought, when it happened. I was out on the veranda. I was looking in the window and listening. I heard it all. I knew she wouldn't stay at Mantrap after that. That James wouldn't let her. And when Steve and Carla went down to the beach, I followed them. I thought maybe they were planning to run away together, and Carla was wearing something that belonged to me as much as to her, and I didn't mean her to leave with it. I wasn't going to let her.

"I was up in the bushes when Steve left her, and as soon as he had got out of sight, I went down to where Carla was. I told her I knew what she was up to. And I told her if she tried anything like that on me, I'd—"

"Miguel!" Solveig was doing her best to stop him. Her pitying best. "I didn't hear you, Miguel! I left as soon as I saw you. You don't have to tell anything you don't want to. You—"

Thorsson said: "Keep out of this, Solveig!" But the boy hadn't even stopped.

"—I told her I'd kill her first. That she had it coming to her, because she'd killed her sister, so she could have that ruby for herself.

"I told her she could put her damn lies over on other people, but she couldn't on me. That is she could manage to get away when the peons burned the ranch, it was funny Lotta hadn't been able to. That I knew too much about the way things were at home, for her to think I'd swallow that.

"Father and mother—and I, when

I was home—lived in what we called the new house. It was big and modern, and father had built it the year I was born. Carla and Lotta weren't mother's children, and they didn't get along with her, nor she with them. So, when they came back from the North, father gave them the old house, where they'd been born, to themselves, with Tonya to look after them.

"It was one of those old Spanish houses, with big doors, and heavy locks, and high-up windows with bars over them. It was like a jail, almost. Father kept his money and things like that in his office. But his first wife's jewels—and the ruby with them—they were in the old part, in a safe built in the wall. Tonya knew where the key was, and Carla was always after her to get the ruby out and let her hold it.

"Lotta and I, we didn't think much about it. It meant money to us, but it never meant money to Carla. It meant something evil, and horrible—and glorious. I remember, even as a little boy, how the look on her face scared me.

"She'd have done anything to have that for herself. Anything! I tell you she killed Lotta for it. I told her so tonight. I told her she had bribed Tonya to help her, got that ruby and run away, and left Lotta locked in that jail of a house for the peons to get or burn.

"And, if she was planning on running away again, to keep me from getting my share of it, I'd spoil her game for her then and there.

"That oarlock she was . . . was killed with was lying on top of the rowboat. I picked it up and swung it in my hand. She didn't laugh at me the way Solveig says she did at Greyling. Carla could be nice when she wanted to be. Sweet as sugar. She was then.

"She said I was a silly, crazy boy, and to put that ugly thing down. She said she was through with Greyling. That she'd turned over a new leaf. She said I must be mad to think she could have harmed her own twin sister. She said that Lotta was over at the new house when the peons came, and that she and Tonya couldn't do anything to help her. And she told me not to worry about the ruby, but to be a good boy and behave myself, that she was staying right there on Mantrap and being a good wife to James, and that when I was ready to go back to school, she'd sell it and give me my share. And she asked me if I wouldn't please go back up to the house and leave her alone; that there was a storm coming up, and she wanted to watch it. And—well, there wasn't anything for me to do but go away. I . . . I believed her. I thought she was telling me the truth.

"She was sitting right there by the rowboat when I went. She had that ruby around her throat, just as she always had. I could see it when the lightning flashed. And I could see her face. She was smiling, sort of soft and happy. I've never seen her so . . . so pretty."

So pretty! That thing lying in the study—pretty!

Even Lars' dry old voice was quavering a little when he started his questions again. Had Miguel looked back after he left? Had he seen anyone with Carla? Had he gone straight to the house, or walked around?

A shake of the head answered the first two questions, but the last one Miguel answered.

"I didn't feel like going back to the house. I was afraid of running into James or Greyling, and I didn't want to. I walked down the beach the other way, to a rock that hangs

out over the lake, and sat there. And when it began to blow so hard, and lightning, I started back to the house.

"I . . . I was cutting up the side of the hill when I heard them bringing Carla up. I . . . I knew it was Carla; I saw her clothes dragging, and her face in Thorsson's flash.

"I knew she'd been . . . murdered, and if they found me out there like that they'd think I'd done it. I was crazy for a little while, I think, and then I began running. I wanted to get up to the house and into my room, so no one would know I'd ever been out of it!

"I'd have done it, too, if . . . if I hadn't gone in the back way and seen that face in the hall. Carla's! Not bruised and mashed like that other one, but I'd rather it had been. For Carla was dead, and this was . . . the evil in her that wouldn't die!

"It'll never die, I tell you! Never! Tonya won't let it. She'll say prayers to that heathen god she's got in her room, and give it blood to drink, and Carla will come back. Just her face, hiding in the shadows, laughing at us. Laughing at all of us!"

I could have laughed myself, at Lars' face, with his jaw hanging.

Straight murder was bad enough, but when Miguel ran in ghosts on top of it—

"What the kid needs is a drink," I said. "And I need one myself. This is O. K. for you folks—you're dry and warm. My shirt's still sticking to me. Where do you keep the liquor, Solveig? Mind showing me? The brand Borsch is exhaling might be all right, if we don't have to take it secondhand."

IX.

It was a break in the tension, anyway, and Pedarson welcomed it.

"Might's well. For me, I'd like

some coffee. And while you're gone, we'll see what Pete has to say. Got everyone else where they could 'a' killed her, and he must 'a' been right handy if he saw what he claims he did."

So he was on that figure in a bathing suit now, the old fox! I knew he'd reach it in time. It wouldn't take him long now to come around to the fact that Solveig might have changed to one before she went down to the beach. And when that time came, I wanted to be ready for him.

The kitchen was empty when Solveig and I reached it, but I could hear the sound of footsteps overhead. I said, "Tonya?" Solveig nodded, and I dropped my voice to a whisper.

"Now's the time to get that bathing suit down to me—quick! I'll stick it inside my shirt and button my reefer over it. There's a stove down at the boathouse. If I don't get a chance to burn it here in the grate, I'll burn it there. I'll try to keep Lars from putting you in a corner on it, but if he does, lie out of it. You've got to. That guy is as stubborn as a mule. Once he gets an idea in his nut, he'll hang on to it, and the devil himself couldn't jar him loose. I don't want him getting any more ideas about you."

Solveig didn't stop to argue. She was gone and back before I'd got the coffee started.

Her suit was one of those skimpy things that young girls wear. It didn't take up much room inside my shirt, but it was wet and gritty with sand and I winced as it scraped my skin. The poor kid was looking nervous and strained, and I was a little jittery myself. I thought it would do us both good to talk things out together, so while we were fixing the trays—Scotch, a bottle of soda, glasses, cups and saucers for the

coffee—we tried to reason out what was behind this story of Borsch's.

"The way I dope it," I told her, "Pete was pretty well tanked when we left him at the Cove. He was probably spying on us from the street, and saw me leave with you. Had a hunch that I'd not only shaken the gizzard out of him, but got his job, and made up his mind to get back at me. He might even have been hanging around when I came back over with his things, and snatched the chance to swipe the rowboat while Lars and I were up in the village hunting for him. Rowing over here from the Cove, with the wind coming up, would have taken time, but I spent a lot of it with Lars. Pete could have made it, easy.

"It must have been around eleven, when you came down to the beach. Pete could have been hiding under the boathouse stairs laying for me, and seen you then. That way he'd have known you were wearing your bathing suit. But the thing that gets me is the time!

"He claims he saw you poking around in the sand by that rowboat when my launch was coming in. He couldn't have seen you then. You weren't there. You were here at the house, and in your room."

Solveig's eyes thanked me for that, but she didn't say anything. And I rambled on, trying my best to puzzle it out.

"I think," I said slowly, "that Borsch saw someone, all right. I think he saw the same 'someone' I did. I think that 'someone' was the murderer. But I think that bathing-suit part is Pete's idea of squaring things with you. And I'm not going to let him get away with it!"

Big words, weren't they? Yeah. They weren't sounding so big to me a few minutes afterward.

Pete was talking when Solveig and I carried our trays into the living room. His eyes were ratty and mean, and his lips a sullen snarl.

"O. K. I was here on the island. So what? I had a right to be. Thorsson hired me. I wasn't quitting till he fired me, and he owed me money. Maybe I would have waited until morning—rowing from the Cove to Mantrap ain't no cinch, not with a wind coming up— But when I found out that the bum who'd shaken me down for that launch key had shaken me down for my job, too, I was so mad I couldn't wait."

"So you were around when I brought the launch over to the Cove tonight, were you?" I said, grinning, and put down my tray.

There wasn't any grin on his face. His snarl was more yellow-toothed than ever.

"Yeah, I saw you. And while you and old walrus-face were chinning, I took a rowboat and came over here to lay for you. Where's that whiskey bottle that was in the engine room? Where's my clothes?"

Lars stopped him there. "They're over at the Cove where O'Hara left them. And you're here. And what I'm trying to find out is how you saw the killer and didn't see the killing. Enough people on this beach 'twixt the time you got here—when you say it was empty—and the time you saw the woman poking 'round in the sand, to start a convention, and you didn't see any of 'em. Or hear 'em, neither."

"I told you why, you old fossil! I told you why half a dozen times. Because I was up in the boathouse loft, out of the wind, and waiting for this guy's boat to come in. That's why. Spying on Greyling and that wench who was playing him wasn't any treat to me. I'd seen them often enough. I was waiting for O'Hara,

and when I heard him slowing for the wharf, I grabbed a poker and went down the outside stairs to lay for him. He'd shaken hell out of me once. He wasn't going to get the chance to do it again.

"No, I didn't have no lights going. Think I was that big a fool? It had been lightning, off and on, ever since I come, and I knew my way around that boathouse. I was on the beach, hiding under the boat-house stairs, when the big flash come, and that was when I seen her."

I had put my tray on a table. Solveig still had hers in her hands. I took it from her then, and found a place for it. I whispered: "Chin up!" and she nodded at me.

Lars must have said something I hadn't caught, for Borsch was at it again.

"No! I told you once I didn't see her face. But I saw her legs, and"—his eyes went to Solveig and his snarl was a leer—"they weren't Tonya's. She was wearing a bathing suit, and she had something black on her head, like a cap, and she was pawing 'round in the sand like as if she'd lost something. I really saw her before the big flash come. When I first heard the boat coming in, and started down the stairs. She's heard it, too, for I saw her standing up and looking out to where it was. Then she began pawing again like as if she was possessed, till—bingo! Seemed like the whole world was on fire, and she was beating it up the hill right through it.

"And when I saw what she was beating it away from, I didn't blame her none.

"Oh, sure I saw. A guy could 'a' seen anything with that hell-fire blazing. I knew it was that Spanish dame of Thorsson's, and the kid had done her in. And I didn't want

none of it. Not me. I wouldn't have had any of it, either, if that bum hadn't wrecked my boat when he drove his in. And wrecked his, too. I was under those steps when he found her. I was under 'em when Thorsson come down the hill, and when you come, too. And if I'd had a little while longer to work on a key for that thing you call a boat, Pedarson, you wouldn't have got the chance to pin your damn murders and stealings on me.

"There's the dame who killed Thorsson's wife, and there's the guy that got her ruby! Wasn't he the one who found her? Wasn't he there beside her before Thorsson come? You went over me with a fine-tooth comb. Why don't you go over him?"

"Been aiming to," Lars drawled. "Been aiming to right along. And now's as good a time as any."

It was a good thing I'd put my tray down. If I hadn't, I might have dropped it. Solveig's bathing suit wasn't cold against my skin now. It was as hot as fire, and burning me. And it was burning me worse in a minute, for Lars had turned to Solveig, and was saying gently:

"That dress you're wearing, Miss Solveig—I meant to ask you before and it sort o' slipped my mind. That the dress you were wearing this evening—before it happened? The one you got on?"

At first I thought Lars was giving Solveig as easy an out as her quick "Yes" showed she did. And then I saw the squint in Lars' eyes, and it was as though Joe Louis had landed one of his left hooks on my jaw!

Solveig had told about taking the rocky, weedy path down to the beach, and back again. She had told about lying for a long time asleep in the damp sand by that rowboat, and that dress she was wearing was

as thin and white and crisp as though it had just come from the laundry! And Lars saw it, and what it meant as well as I did.

If that bathing suit of Solveig's had felt hot against me before, it was sizzling now!

When Lars turned his drawled: "No objections to my looking you over, son?" I wasn't feeling any too happy. And there wasn't anything for me to do about it but bluff as long as I could.

"Sure, you can search me, if you want to play the fool," I snapped. "But use your head. If I stole that ruby, I had to steal it during that first minute or two after I'd found the body, and before Thorsson came. You know what that . . . thing back in the study looks like. Do you think, running on it like I did, with the wind blowing and the rain beating on me, and . . . it in front of me, that I'd have wasted any time hunting around it for a gimcrack? Even if I'd had it in mind—and God knows I didn't."

"You had it in your mind plenty when you were over at the Cove," Lars reminded me. "No, son. If Miss Solveig will just step out a bit, I'll have a look."

Solveig didn't stir. I hoped my face wasn't as white as hers, but the way I felt, it probably was.

Lars motioned to my pockets. "Suppose you empty 'em," he said. "They're big—a lot of things could go in there."

"A lot of things are in there," I grinned, trying to keep my bluff going. Trying to kid him along. And I took my time emptying them, and turned them inside out when I was through. Pipes, tobacco, a couple of neckties, a pair of socks I hadn't had time to wash, and, from the inside zippered pocket, my billfold, with my papers, and what was left

of my money. I even emptied the pocket of my flannel shirt—a package of cigarettes, a paper of matches, and a shilling piece. I took off my sneakers and shook them. I hadn't any socks on, so I wiggled my bare toes and grinned.

"Sorry—no ruby. Nothing but my hide now and a guy can't hide a ruby big as a hen's egg, in his skin."

"He could hide it beneath his shirt, though," Lars said. "And he could hide other things there, too."

"I told you to go out, Miss Solveig. I wanted to save you the worst of this. But mebbe it's just as well."

"You see it ain't only a ruby I'm hunting for. I didn't really expect to find that when I started. It's something else. It's more like a . . . a woman's bathing suit. I got a little something of what you and O'Hara was talking about here in front of the fire awhile ago. When you thought I was in the cabin. I didn't aim to listen; I was walking quiet, I guess, and you two didn't hear me. It had a lot about a bathing suit in it. And when you went up the back stairs a piece ago, and come down again—well, I wasn't far from the hall door. You had something in your hands then. It's gone now. I figger mebbe O'Hara may have it."

I was like a dumb ox, standing there. It was Solveig who had the nerve to face it. And she looked almost glad.

"O. K., Dennis, give it to him. We were fools to try it. It's my bathing suit, Constable Pedarson. I changed before I went down to the beach. I jumped off the rocks and swam down. That was why I was tired, and lay down behind that rowboat to rest. But I wasn't the one Pete saw, bathing suit or no bathing suit, because I wasn't on the beach when Dennis brought his launch in. I was

right where I said I was, upstairs in my room."

My eyes were sick when I gave that suit to Pedarson. It was a wisp of a thing, made of some sort of black silk stuff. It looked like the mask they put on a murderer's head when they send him to the chair, and I felt as though I'd put it on Solveig's. The truth, as she'd have told it, if I hadn't blundered in, would have been a lot better for her in the end. The whole thing had been my idea, and I told him so. I told him, too, why I had done it. About the shadow I'd seen streaking up the hill when I brought my boat in.

"I thought it was a man then, and I still think so," I said stubbornly. "You know as well as I do why Borsch is so keen on making it Solveig. Do you want to take the word of a lying bum like that, against mine and hers?"

Lars could see how badly I felt, and his "It ain't always the folks that looks the guiltiest, that is" carried a grim sort of comfort.

He sent Solveig upstairs then, and finished hunting for the ruby. He didn't act surprised that it wasn't there. Just told me to get dressed and yanked Pete away from the whiskey tray, while he poured himself a cup of coffee and drank it.

Miguel and Thorsson and Greyling sat humped in their chairs. They weren't saying a word.

When Lars saw I was ready, he wiped his mustache with his hand and motioned Pete and me toward the door.

"You folks," he said to the others, "best go to your rooms and try and get some sleep. There's one among us, somewhere, that isn't going to find that too easy. Mebbe tomorrow will tell which one it is."

"I'm spending the night with Pete and O'Hara at the boathouse, and

keeping an eye on them. I'll be easy to get, if anyone needs me."

Miguel snapped out of gloom then, and grabbed at Pedarson's sleeve.

"I'm not spending a night in this house!" he cried shrilly. "I'm going to the boathouse with you. It isn't the living I'm afraid of. It's the dead. Carla will stay here where her body is—she won't follow me down there. I'm going with you!"

"You're going upstairs where you belong." Thorsson's voice had the whip of a lash in it. "You're acting like a hysterical woman. Try to be a man, if you can."

I felt sorry for the kid, but there wasn't anything I could do about it. Thorsson went to the door with us. Pete went out first, with Lars behind him. As I started to follow, Mr. Thorsson stopped me, with a hand on my shoulder.

"I want to thank you, O'Hara," he said. "It was a good try, even if it didn't work."

Thanking me for putting Solveig on the spot! Letting me see that he understood why I had tried, and trying to make me feel better about it!

I wanted to bawl. And I never forgot the tired, slow smile he gave me, nor the friendliness in his eyes.

They weren't there the next morning when I saw him.

He was dead.

But before that happened, Lars and I had come to a sort of understanding. Had a long talk, and put our cards face up, between us.

X.

When we left the lodge for the boathouse, the rain had slowed to a drizzle that the wind was blowing into a mist as fine as fog. Lars was all right, with his slicker buttoned around him and his hat pulled over his face, but I hadn't been too dry

when I left the house, and walking down to the beach didn't help matters any. I was looking forward to lighting up the stove, drying off and getting a little sleep.

I didn't do any of them. Once I saw the looks of the cot after Pete had used it while he waited to take a whack at me, I was willing to turn it over to him again. And so was Lars. We left him there, sullen, grumbling, to sleep off the fresh load of whiskey he'd got up at the house, and Lars and I took over the engine room.

I'd got my duffel bag open by that time, and found some dry clothes. While I changed into them, Lars found an oil stove, and lighted it. He drew up a couple of boxes, too, that made decent-enough chairs, took over one for himself, and motioned me to the other.

He had his chewing tobacco. I had my smokes and I was warm and dry. Outside of that bathing-suit business and my worry for Solveig, I hadn't anything to kick about. Pedarson was no smart, ambitious city cop out to make a record for himself. He was just an honest, straightforward guy, doing his best as a pinch hitter until the right people could take over.

"This is the way I got it figured," he said slowly, moving his cud so he could talk around it. "We've got two crimes here—theft and murder. I may be wrong, but I can't see them together. Take him now"—his thumb jerked up to the creaking and tramping overhead—"the easy way, right off the bat, would be to say he done it. Killed that poor critter up there at the lodge, and stole the trinket she wore. He's sore enough and drunk enough and mean enough. I could pin it on him, all right. No trouble a-tall. And it'd save a nasty mess. Mebbe that's what the fellers

from Lake City will do. Wouldn't blame 'em none. But, to me, it don't make sense. Not the killing part. If Pete had killed that lady, he'd killed her different. After that first whack with the oarlock—the one that killed her—he'd taken what he was after and beat it in that boat o' hisn, storm or no storm. It was still there, you know. You hadn't smashed it in then. He wouldn't have spent no time on spoiling her beauty. It was the girl he had his mad against, not the Mrs.

"No. Pete could 'a' taken the ruby, all right—mebbe he did. Don't forget he was here all the time we was carrying her up to the house. He could 'a' found that thing if it'd been there, and hid it easy. But the one that cut up that dead woman's face so there wasn't no face left was thinking about more'n stealing jewelry!

"And there's you. You didn't kill her. Pete clears you there. But you had the same chance to steal the ruby as he did, and plenty of chances to hide it, if you'd set your mind to it. Me—I don't think you did. But me and the Lake City police don't always think the same on lots of things. And still taking the ruby and the killing together—there's Miguel."

Lars stopped there to aim a stream of tobacco juice through a grille in the stove, and listen judiciously to the quantity and quality of the sizzle that followed. I lit another cigarette and waited.

"I'm not so sure about Miguel. He could 'a' done both. He's the nervous, fiery sort. Got a temper and can't do much with it! He wanted his share of that ruby, and he had a grudge against the dead woman that must 'a' gone pretty deep when he'd say she'd kill her own sister. He hasn't any more of an alibi than

the rest of them. And he admits having a fight with her. But, hell, they all had a fight with her! Never saw a murder where so many folks could 'a' done it, and was any more willing!

"Kind of a foolish stunt you did, son, hiding that bathing suit of Solveig's. Might 'a' knowed I'd ketch you. Sort o' sweet on her, aren't you? Thought so over at the Cove yest'day. I like her myself. Always have, from the time she first come to Mantrap. Hate to see her mixed up in a thing like this. And there's a lot about that story of Pete's that's going to look bad for her."

"Lies," I broke in angrily. "Lies. All Borsch wants is to square things up with Solveig. You ought to know that. How do you know he didn't see her when she first lay down behind that boat! He'd see her bathing suit then. Easy enough for him to dress whatever he saw or whoever he saw, in one!"

"Could be." Lars spat again. "Could be. I've thought of that, too. But Pete did see someone poking 'round that rowboat and running away when the flash came, for you saw the running shadow, too. You say it was a man, but you were out on the lake, and whatever it was you saw was already leaving the beach for the hill. Pete had a better look, and a longer one. He wasn't over twenty feet away. He says it was a woman in a bathing suit. Which story do you think the Lake City folks will believe—if they believe either one—yours or his?"

"If it happens to be his, remember—like Pete p'inted out—there's only two women on this island that could wear a bathing suit. And one of 'em was dead.

"I've got ideas about this thing. Here's one. You probably ain't going to like it much. Miguel and

Solveig could 'a' been in this thing together. Don't forget they were the last ones, near as we know, to see Mrs. Thorsson alive. They both hated her, Miguel because of the ruby, and Solveig for what she'd done to Greyling and her father."

I crushed out my cigarette and lit another. I was so mad my hand shook. "Yeah?" I growled. "I can picture Solveig putting those fancy touches on a corpse, can't you? Or Miguel doing it, maybe, then walking away and leaving the one thing he'd killed her for. Sending Solveig back to find it, and let Borsch spot her with her bathing suit."

"Hell, Pedarson, if that's the best you can do, you'd better let things alone till Lake City takes over. They couldn't think up anything crazier than that."

The wind was dying down a little, and out on the lake we could hear the heavy *chug-chug* of a steamer laboring against the waves. As it passed the island, it sent out a couple of long, drawn-out blasts.

"The excursion boat going back to Lake City," I said. "They must've had a time with the storm, for they were going down when I left for the Cove. Should've been in hours ago. They had a pretty gay party on board. I hailed them. One of the dames lost her hat. Bet she's losing something else besides her hat, about this time!"

"Seen those city folks lose a lot of things that wa'n't rightly hats," he chuckled, "time's when I've had 'em fishing in a swell. And old Lost Lake is swelling pretty tonight. No doubt of that." Then, that matter-of-fact mind of his, picking up that business of the hat and mulling it over—

"Must've been riding pretty close in to the island, I'd say, for you to see a woman lose a hat, a night as

pitch-black as this one was."

He made me nervous, picking up little things that didn't mean anything and wasting time on them, and I snapped at him like a fidgety woman.

"Sure they ride in close—the lake steamers always ride close to Mantrap. And if you're trying to pin me down, I don't know whether it was a woman and I don't know whether it was a hat. All I saw was a dark something bobbing around on the backwash as they passed through the search. What you need is Miguel. He'd put a face under it for you. That's his specialty."

"Kind o' touchy, ain't you?" Lars asked. But he seemed to have talked himself out. He sat there, his legs stretched out, his eyes closed, his jaws working in unceasing rhythm.

I knew he wasn't sleeping, but he sent me to sleep, just watching him sitting there, chewing.

It didn't seem to me I had closed my eyes before I was opening them again to the gray light of early morning and the banging of fists against the door that Lars had barred against the wind and rain.

Lars had been asleep, too, but he was quicker than I. And he was the one who unbarred the door and caught Miguel as he stumbled in.

The boy's face was gray and you could see the whites all around his staring eyes.

"It's James!" he sobbed. "It's Thorsson—he's dead! Tonya found him not ten minutes ago. She . . . she was taking fresh candles in to the cabin to put . . . to put around her. And there he was, on the floor. He's there now—I saw him! All sprawled out, and a revolver in his hand."

"Tonya says he shot himself. Maybe he did. But Carla drove him to it! He killed her, and she made

him kill himself. Oh, laugh at me if you want to. Laugh. She's laughing, too. She was laughing last night—in my room. I wakened, and there she was, and when I tried to scream and couldn't, she laughed and . . . and went away!"

The noise had brought Borsch down from upstairs. He was standing in the doorway, hitching up his pants, taking it all in from bleared, bloodshot eyes. And he trailed along with us when Lars and I walked Miguel back up the hill.

The boy was all in, walking so close to Lars he was treading on his heels, and jumping like a scared rabbit at every wet, swishing leaf and dim, unreal shadow. And early as it was, there were plenty of shadows to walk along that close, gloomy path beside us, and Miguel was seeing Carla's ghost in all of them. The ghost of a dead woman, so evil her evil couldn't die with the body that nourished it, but must live after and feed itself on blood.

It made such ugly thinking that the grim reality of death that was waiting for us was almost a relief beside it.

The only lights in the study were the candles that Tonya had put there the night before and kept burning ever since, but the door was open, bringing the dull gray of the morning with it and the *boom-boom* of the waves as they broke against the rocks below.

Tonya was there, standing in front of the couch, as though shielding with her own squat body that other body she had loved from contact with this new intruder in her house of death.

I hardly saw her. I gave one glance at Thorsson's sprawled, still shadow, and didn't stop beside it. For Solveig was there, too, crouched over against the farther wall, and I

went straight to her and put my arm around her to draw her close against me. She seemed glad to have me. Clung to me like a child.

Lars was nervous. The murky, candle-lit room wasn't helping any.

"Must be a light switch 'round here somewhere," he grumbled. "Can't someone turn it on?"

It was Greyling who did that. I hadn't noticed him until then. He was uncombed and unshaven. He looked as though he hadn't slept for years and never would sleep again.

From his knees beside Thorsson's body, Lars snapped:

"Standing 'round! What good's that doing? Go back into the house and take Miss Solveig with you. This ain't no place for her."

I got her there, somehow. Miguel and Steve came with us, with Pete shuffling after.

Someone—Tonya, probably—had kept the fire up, but the room was just as we had left it the night before. Even the coffee tray was there.

I put Solveig on the couch where we had sat together before, and chafed her hands. They were cold as ice. I poured out a good shot of whiskey and made her gulp it down.

Greyling had his back to us, staring out a window. Pete was mumbling to himself and looking at the whiskey. Miguel was still babbling about his laughing ghost. They made me sick. I took it out on Miguel.

"Do something!" I yelled. "Another twenty-four hours and you'll be in the booby hatch, if you don't get hold of those nerves. Call that Indian woman in here and start some breakfast cooking. Let's have something hot in our stomachs. We need it, all of us."

The kid drew back like a rat cornered. "Try and get me in there!

I won't go. Nothing could make me! Nothing!"

I'd a great notion to show him that something could, but I didn't have to. Lars and Tonya, both, were coming through the curtains by that time, and Lars must have had the same thought as I, for Tonya went straight to the kitchen and began rattling her pans. Pedarson turned to the fire, holding his hands out to the blaze. His age was showing on him. Even his shoulders sagged.

From his place by the window, Greyling said savagely:

"Well, you've got the murdered and the murderer. You and your Lake City friends ought to be satisfied now."

And Lars answered, slowly, heavily:

"I've got two murders, but I still ain't got the murderer. Mr. Thorsson didn't shoot himself, you see. Someone shot him. Someone who crept up behind him while he was standing beside his wife's dead body, and sent a bullet through his brain. Someone who knew Mr. Thorsson had that gun in his desk and had the chance to get it. The only mistake they made was when they tried to fix up a suicide.

"No man could shoot himself the way Mr. Thorsson was shot, and even if he could, he would've died with his fingers on the trigger of the gun, not folded on the barrel. And that's where Thorsson's were. No. Mr. Thorsson was killed like I said. Pete didn't kill him. O'Hara didn't. Nor me. And that leaves—"

"Miguel and Solveig, I suppose. And me." Greyling's voice sounded stronger than it had the night before. The fear had gone out of his eyes. Carla's death had crushed him. Made a coward of him. Thorsson's seemed to have given him a sullen sort of courage. "Miguel can speak

for himself. I don't think Solveig has to. She wouldn't have killed her father. As for me, you can count me out. I didn't kill him, either.

"I still think just what I said yesterday, just what I said now, that you have your murder and you have your murderer. I think Thorsson killed his wife. If Thorsson was murdered, as you say he was, perhaps someone else thought so, too. There's Tonya, you know. I can't see her waiting for the law to take its course against the one who killed her mistress. She was the one who found him. She could have been the one who murdered him just as easily.

"And there's the ruby. That didn't fall off Carla's neck and get lost in the sand. It was either taken off before she died, or jerked off afterward. The clasp was a patent one that couldn't come loose by itself. The chain was old hand-wrought silver, and strong as iron.

"Borsch could have taken it. O'Hara could. They both had the chance. And what are you doing about it? Nothing—but chewing that damn cud of yours, and talking. If you think Thorsson was murdered, find out who did it, or get someone who can. God in heaven, Pedarson! If you're right about Thorsson, can't you see what you've got on this island? You've got a killer running loose, and you've got a ruby worth a fortune, and you can't put your hands on either? You'd better get over to the Cove and send someone out here who knows what he's doing, or you'll have us all dead!"

XI.

"Guess you're right." Lars' voice was as heavy as his sagging shoulders. "I'm old. I forgot to take that gun away with me last night

Tonya stood there, as though shielding Carla from contact with this new intruder in her house of death.



like I should 'a' done, and Mr. Thorsson—well, he is dead. O'Hara and I couldn't find Borsch over at the Cove when we looked for him, but I never thought he might be here. He'd 'a' got away with my boat, if O'Hara hadn't warned me.

"I forget too many things I ought to remember, and I remember too

many things, mebbe, I ought to forget. Like that hat you thought you saw in the lake last night, son, when the steamer went by. That keeps running in my head. And Miguel here, and them ghosts of his. They seem to mean something to me, and I don't know what it is. I keep thinking about them, and thinking

about them, and when I come nigh to an answer, I get scared and back away.

"I ain't doing no more questioning of anybody. I'm doing what Greyling says. I'm going over to the Cove soon's the lake quiets a bit, and call Lake City. Get the sheriff and the coroner down here. Let them do the thinking.

"And now—ain't that Tonya, yonder? Guess she's telling us breakfast's ready. If we had a bite to eat, we'd all feel better."

I liked Lars Pedarson. Down in my heart I'd had confidence in him. To see him going off on a tangent like this—that fool story of mine about the hat I thought I'd seen; Miguel and his ghosts—knocked the props out from under me.

I thought: "Maybe Greyling is right. Maybe Tonya did kill Thorsson. Maybe she's gone haywire and will kill all of us, before we're out of this! She might even have killed Carla; that ruby could have had its points for her, the same as anyone else."

Oh, I thought of a lot of things as we straggled into that dining room together. And most of them were about Tonya. Trying to choke down the food she had cooked, with her padding in and out the dining room on those bare, noiseless feet of hers, wasn't easy. I could see her creeping up behind Thorsson with that gun in her hand, so plainly, that I could feel its muzzle on my own head.

Pete took his place at the table with us. There isn't much class distinction in a house where there have been two murders and the murderer is still uncaught.

Solveig didn't try to eat. She drank her coffee, but that was all. Greyling, Miguel and I weren't much better. The constable ate slowly,

thoughtfully. He looked unhappy, tired and old. It was Borsch who was enjoying himself. Reaching for this, pawing for that, wolfing his food. But even he stopped, when Tonya threw her bomb.

She had come in from the kitchen with a fresh plate of toast. She banged it on the table in front of Pete. She said: "Eat, peeg! Make yourself fat before you die!" And to the rest of us, her beady eyes smoldering deep in their rolls of fat:

"Dogs, peegs—all of you! You theenk I keel heem—that old man een there beside my baby? You lie! My baby—she ees not dead. He, Miguel, tell you that, and you laugh. Her body maybe, but not her. She walk and talk. She live and hate, until the thing she love is hers again.

"You theenk maybe Tonya make the foolishness. You theenk maybe that the dead not talk, and the living not hear. That ees not true. I, Tonya, sit beside my dead lady's body. I talk weeth her. I burn the candles. I say the prayers. I tell her, 'Rest, eet ees over. Eet ees finish. Sleep.' She tell me, 'No.' She tell me she weel not sleep, until she have her jewel again. She says: 'Here on my heart, Tonya. Then I sleep—'"

I know this sounds crazy. Movie stuff; cheap melodrama. I know that, but it happened. I can see that black woman now, standing there before us. I can hear her voice so clearly that she seems to be in this room with me, looking at me as I write. Waiting for me to get the words that are coming from her lips!

"She say to me—she say, 'Tonya, you tell them thees for me. You tell them that blood weel run until I have what ees mine once more.' She say, 'The shadows, they weel hide me, but I weel walk in them and

strike out of them, until what has been mine ees mine again.'"

That was when Tonya's voice broke, lost its heavy gutturals, while her hands went out in an eerie gesture, as though shielding us from something that no one but she could see.

"And she weel! I, Tonya, warn you that she weel! You must leesten to me. I tell you what my lady say, but thees I say: The jewel, eet ees hers. She love eet so. Eet ees her blood, her soul. It must lie where eet belong, on her heart, so she may sleep and rest.

"For the love of God, may she find eet there!"

She was out of the room and back in her kitchen before we knew what had hit us. A dropped feather would have echoed in the silence she left behind her.

And it was a silence that held until Miguel broke in on it with his crazy blubbering. "I told you Carla couldn't die! I told you and you laughed at me. She'll kill us all—I know she will—one after another. She's in the shadows. Death walking there. Murder walking. She—"

He was a wreck, that kid. It made my stomach turn. But I felt a shamed sort of kinship with him. A dead woman who can talk, who can hide in the shadows and kill from the shadows, whether you believe in it or not, can still make your hair rise and your skin prick, when there's a mombi witch like Tonya to put it over!

It had gone over with all of us—even Lars. He pushed back his chair and rose to his feet. His voice was so husky he had to clear his throat, and stop after he had begun, to begin all over.

"Outside Miguel, I guess you folks don't put much stock in what Tonya said. Think it is ignorant

talk, for ignorant people—like me, mebbe. For, you see, I do put stock in it.

"When a man's lived as long as I have, he finds out there's things in this life that are hard to explain away by just saying they ain't true; that they can't happen. Take that Indian reservation up beyond the Cove. I've seen things there and heard them; things wiser men and me tried to get the right of, and couldn't.

"I think James Thorsson was trying to get the right of some of them when he died. I think he had got the right of some of them, and that was why he did die. I think, speaking for me"—the old man's voice was louder then; harsher, as though he were pounding what he had to say right around that table at each of us in turn—"if I had that necklace that Tonya says her dead lady can't sleep in peace without; if I had it, mind you, I'd put it back where she asks to have it put, and I'd do it so quick it'd make the dust fly."

Not one of us spoke or moved, but our eyes were following Pedarson's as though they were one pair, and all coming to rest at once on Pete Borsch's face. And if I ever saw a face where superstition and terror were fighting a death battle with guilt and greed, that face was his!

He knew where Carla's ruby was; there wasn't any doubt of that! But just then he wasn't telling.

"Look, damn you!" he said thickly, and the hand he drew across his lips was shaking. "Look. You ain't got nothing on me. And if you did have, it would take more than the ghost of a dead cat like her in the cabin, to scare it out of me." And shoving back his chair, he stomped out of the room, and we could hear the veranda door slamming after him.

"Heading back to the boathouse,"

I thought, "and to the bottle of stolen whiskey that probably was waiting for him." And I said: "There goes your ruby, Pedarson. If you aren't going after it, I am!" and started.

Lars pulled me back.

"Don't think he's got it on him, do you?" he drawled. "And there's a million places on this island where he could have it hidden, and it'd still be hidden five years from now if he wanted to wait that long to get it. Hold your horses. Pete sounded mighty brave, but he wasn't. He was scared. Best thing to do with him is to leave him alone. Give him a spell to think things over, and I shouldn't be a-tall surprised if, by the time the Lake City police get down here, that trinket wasn't back where Tonya wants it put.

"There's a radio in the other room, ain't there, Miss Solveig? If you'd just excuse me, I'd sort o' like to tune in on it and see what the weather station up at Lake City is saying. Like to get over to the Cove soon's I can, but there ain't no use running the risk, if they can't get a boat down from there.

"And, Miguel, I said I wasn't asking no more questions. But there's a few things I'd like to hear about, so I can tell the police when they come. O'Hara can take Miss Solveig up to her room, and after he sees she's all right, he can come where the rest of us are. Think that'd be a good plan, Miss Solveig. You've had a bad time and look like you need a little sleep."

Lars might be an old man, and a little out of his depth in a murder case like this, but he was giving me a break with Solveig, and my eyes thanked him. And perhaps he wasn't so dumb, after all. That part about Borsch—that had been smart. Borsch

wasn't the type you could bully into something, but he was the type who'd scare.

If Tonya or Miguel could materialize their ghost so he could see it, then we would get action!

We were to have action, all right. It certainly wasn't the action I would have wished for—or expected! God knows that.

Solveig was glad to go to her room, but she was a lot more glad that I was going with her. I could see by the way she had caught my hand when we left the dining room, and clung to it, how she hated to be alone; how she dreaded the thoughts that would come to her.

We went up the back way. Up those narrow stairs from the kitchen hall, where Miguel had seen his face, laughing out of the shadows, less than twelve hours before. It seemed a million hours. At the top, the stairway gave way to a narrow hall, with a door opening off over the kitchen el.

"Tonya's room," Solveig said. "No one ever goes in there; it's sacred. It's the only door in the hall. Our rooms are off the balcony, here." We turned the sharp angled corner and we were on it.

It was the balcony that skirted the living room, with its white birch railings showing through the bright hangings that covered them. And I couldn't help but think how easy it would be to crouch behind those hangings, as Solveig had crouched the night before, and hear everything going on below, and see everything, safe from being seen.

Solveig must have seen my eyes narrowed on it and guessed what I was thinking, for she pointed to a Navaho rug close to the head of the stairs and said: "That's where I was when Miguel screamed, and ran back to the study. And I was there when

Steve and Tonya were talking. My room's down there"—she nodded toward the end of the balcony. "It only took a second or two to get here."

There seemed to be four rooms opening off the balcony. A large one at the north end, which I knew must have been her father's, the way Solveig hurried by; the next two Steve's and Miguel's, and the one at the end, Solveig's.

It was a nice room, fresh and bright and cheerful. It was a young girl's room. A happy girl's room. The girl who had planned that room and furnished it, the girl who had stood on the hilltop with the wind blowing her hair, so glad to be alive, had been a happy girl. There was no happiness in the face I was looking into now. No joy of living there. And suddenly, the pity and love inside me were joined in a storm as fierce as the storm of the night before, and as unstoppable.

I stood there just inside the door and stared down at her. I felt like a kid. I was red, even to my ears. I said:

"This is no time to tell a girl you love her. I know that, Solveig. You don't know me at all. I haven't known you twenty-four hours, but it seems to me I've known you always—and loved you; that all the lives I've lived before, were just working up to you.

"I'm not asking you to love me. That's too much to ask of any girl—to love a man who hasn't proven himself worth loving. I'm just asking you—when this is over, when it has grown to be just a bad dream to you—I'm asking you, then, to give me a chance. Could you give me that to look forward to, before I go back downstairs again?"

Solveig didn't try to look surprised or pretend, as lots of girls

might. Her eyes were as honest as mine, and they gave their answer straight into them.

"I don't have to wait," she said simply. "I'm giving it to you now. I think I love you, Dennis, but I don't know. I hurt so all over that it's hard to find anything but hurt in me. But I do trust you; I know that. I think . . . I think if I didn't have you with me, I'd die. I don't think I could stand it all."

I kissed her then. And she kissed me back. I'd kissed a lot of girls in my life, and thought I loved them, for a time, just as Solveig had kissed Greyling, probably, and thought she loved him. But, for both of us then, it was as though we had kissed each other with lips that never had known kisses before.

When I left her there and went back downstairs, murder and death had been forgotten for a little. I felt as though I were walking on air.

I was to walk nearer to utter horror before that day was ended than, I pray the Lord, I'll ever be forced to walk again!

I was halfway down the stairs when I met Miguel coming up. He looked as he had when he had told us of Thorsson's death, and he was stumbling over the steps like a blind man. I said, "What's the matter, kid? Sick?" He never heard me.

I had turned and started to follow him when I heard the bang of his bedroom door and, shrugging, went down the way I'd been heading.

Lars had his broadcast. A radio station at Lake City made a regular feature of weather forecasts, warnings for the commercial fishermen, or picnic parties. It was going full blast when I came down.

Greyling was in a chair before the fire, his back to the room, but Lars was beside the radio and motioned me over.

Last night's storm had been a bad one, but I hadn't realized how bad until I heard the announcer going over the casualty list. Not so many fishing boats. Those guys were wise. The accidents were mostly among pleasure parties from the dozens of resort towns that lined that fifty-mile stretch of shore. Boats had been wrecked, overturned. Some of their passengers had been drowned, others rescued, some were still being searched for. The Lake City boats had been unable to be of much help, but it was thought by noon that the waves would be down enough so searching crews could get out.

"Gosh!" I exclaimed. "The old girl was sure on a rampage, wasn't she?"

"Seems like most everything was on a rampage last night, doesn't it, son? As though Mr. Devil had taken the lid plumb off hell and turned his whole damned kit and caboodle of troubles out. You missed part of that broadcast, though. It's a part that might interest you. Just finished announcing it when you come down.

"That steamer from the hotel—the one you saw passing last night—had her engine go dead on her. She got herself caught in the trough of the waves, and darn near rocked herself to pieces before they could get her started again.

"That's why she was so late going back. Lost a passenger, too—a woman, the announcer says. Didn't give her name. The captain thinks she must 'a' been leaning over the rail, sick, like a lot of them were, and when the ship begun its bobbing round, she just naturally tumbled over. Dark as pitch, their lights off and everything. Didn't even know she was missing till they tied up this morning and begun counting heads."

I said: "That won't be so good for business, will it?" And then, because I was beginning to feel like kidding again:

"Too bad it didn't happen off Mantrap, Pedarson. You might have got a head under that hat I saw, after all!"

XII.

It wasn't the constable's gentle: "Might have, at that, sonny," that hit me so hard. It was the look that went with it—a narrowed, quizzical look that was saying as plainly as words: "There was a body under it, you consarned idiot. Haven't you seen that yet?"

And all at once I was seeing a lot of things. I was seeing so many that my head was whirling with them! I was seeing a girl that Carla had left to die, a girl Carla had thought did die. But who didn't! I was seeing that girl, hurt, perhaps, crazed with fear, but rescued some way or other. Maybe by a servant who had been faithful; perhaps carried away by the bandits themselves, but rescued, God only knows how, and living to track Carla down, and take out her vengeance on her!

A thing like that would take money, it would take time. Lotta Mendez had the time, and with hate behind her and her wrongs to prod her on, some way or other, she had found the money! Escape, perhaps, from whoever or whatever had held her; Mexico City; picking up Carla's trail there; the news of her marriage, and where she had gone. And then—following.

The Mendez family had been a proud family and a wealthy one. They must have had friends, and among them some who might have believed in Lotta and her story, and helped her.

I could see her at the Lake City Hotel, registered under another name, probably, taking that steamer trip up and down the lake, half a dozen times, maybe, and getting her bearings, making her plans, knowing that wherever Carla was she'd have that ruby with her, and determined to get it back, if she had to kill her to do it.

Oh, Lotta Mendez, Carla's twin sister, had been Lake City's missing woman, the night of the storm, but she hadn't fallen overboard as the boat's captain thought—she had jumped overboard! The dark blob that I'd thought a hat had been her black hair, caught under a bathing cap, maybe, for those evening excursions on a hot night were bathing excursions, as well, and bathing suits were common on them; more so than dresses.

How everything checked now—even the bathing suit! The woman Pete had seen clawing so frantically in the sand? Lotta, of course, hunting for the necklace that had been lost in the quarrel and the killing that had followed it! The figure I'd seen running up the cliff? Lotta, frightened away by my coming, before she could find the thing she wanted so terribly? Lotta, with her sister's blood still red on her hands! Lotta would have had the hate to give those terrible, mutilating blows. She would have the patience to hide and wait until she could find the ruby and get away with it. And there were so many places on this three-mile stretch of island where she could have hidden—where she was hiding. There were no locks on the outside doors. Why should there be, to the only house on the island? The face Miguel had seen had been hers. Prowling, spying, listening! Hiding behind those hangings on the balcony rail! Per-

haps she had been hiding there like Solveig, last night, laughing to herself over the fright she had given Miguel, and listening to the talk down below. Tonya had heard her lady demanding her ruby back, but it hadn't been "her lady's" voice, it had been Lotta's. That cunning in her would have told her that someone had that ruby, and was hiding it. And, once she got her hands on it, how easy! Three miles of timber and undergrowth to hide in! A raft, a board picked up somewhere; swimming it down the lake until she could be found as a refugee from the storm! It had taken patience, cunning to get her to the island. She'd have the patience and the cunning to figure a way to get herself off it!

My eyes were like dinner plates with the things they were seeing, and my voice was so thick with excitement when I found it at last that all I could get out, was a stunned: "My God, Lars! Lotta!" And even that was a whisper.

"Beginning to soak in on you, is it?" Lars was whispering, too, but his glance toward Greyling warned me why. "Thought it would. Been mulling it over ever since you told me about that hat you thought you saw, but I wasn't real sure until I heard that radio broadcast just now. Course I ain't what you'd call real sure, yet. And there ain't no sense looking for her. And no time. As many places for her to hide on this island as there are places for Borsch to hide that ruby he's got. That's why I played up to Tonya, at breakfast. Thought mebbe we could scare Borsch into putting it back where she could lay her hands on it; it'd keep her quiet while I got the Lake City folks down.

"Pretty smart, her playing ghost and scaring Tonya to work for her. I figger she's got it in for Tonya,

same's she had it in for the dead woman, but she won't do anything to her, not long's she can use her.

"Probably had to kill Thorsson, because he caught her in the cabin this morning. But there ain't none of the rest of you in danger, long as you stay quiet and don't prowl around looking for her. If she'd meant to do any more killings, she'd have kept Thorsson's gun, 'stead of trying to make it look like suicide. Still and all, the quicker I can get over to the Cove and bring them Lake City police down here, the better it's going to be for all of us."

The radio had helped to cover our whispering, but it had faded off into a buzz of static, and from his chair Greyling swung on us, his voice edged with nerves.

"Shut that damn radio off," he rasped. "And haven't you anything to do, Pedarson, but gas with a tramp who's place is in the kitchen? Get that boat of yours going, and do the telephoning you said you had to do. If other boats are out on the lake this morning, yours could be. What are you waiting for?"

His question had its answer. It was an answer I'll never forget through this life and the next and all the lives to come. First, the loud banging of a door from the balcony above us, and then, picking up its echo, Solveig's scream!

A nightmare cry, low, bubbling, to rise and fill that house and overflow it, until, to me, it was filling the world!

Pedarson's long legs had reached the stairs in a bound, and I was right with him, with Greyling stumbling behind us. I don't remember my feet touching the stairs. I took them as though I had wings. But even before we had reached the top we saw Solveig.

She was standing in front of

Miguel's closed door, holding the knob, pulling with all her might against it.

"It's Tonya!" she screamed. "She's killed Miguel! I heard a noise and ran out, and there she was, bending over him, trying to pull out the knife she'd killed him with! I slammed the door on her, and— Oh, she's mad, I tell you! Mad! She'll kill us all! She—"

Lars jerked her to one side and shoved her toward me. He had his gun out and in his hand.

"Keep aside!" he barked. "All of you. Keep out of the way." And he yanked the door open.

Tonya was there, all right, only she wasn't leaning over the bed now. She was standing beside it, facing us, and she had the knife Solveig had seen in her hands. A meat knife from the kitchen, sharp as a razor, and pretty horrible now to look at. But not as horrible as the body on the bed behind her. I looked at it, and choked.

Poor Miguel! Poor kid! There had been so little blood on Carla, dreadful as her death had been. With Thorsson, there had been none. Here, it was like a farm butchering, soaking the bedclothes, dripping on the floor to lie in puddles so fresh they hadn't begun to darken.

Lars gave me the gun. He said: "Hold it on her, O'Hara, and use it if you have to," and walked over, to stare for a long minute at the bed's still burden before he turned his grim face to Tonya.

My eyes followed his. Something strange was happening to Tonya. She seemed to be shriveling inside, with her flesh following that inward shrinking, drawing in on it, until its flabby hugeness was like a bladder with the water that had filled it, seeping out before my eyes. And her skin wasn't the color of

rich, smoked bacon any more. It was as gray as the ashes of a burned-out fire.

"I keel heem," she said stolidly. And I could see my fine new theories dying before they'd had a chance to breathe. "I keel Miguel. He hate my lady, he steal her ruby. He say 'no' when I tell heem to geev it her again. I keel the master. I keel heem when he come to stand beside my dead lady, and boast the t'ing he do to her. He take my lady's life from her. Tonya take hees. You have the truth now. What I say thees morning was a lie. Do what you weesh weeth Tonya. She make fight no more."

Lars' eyes and mine met. What I was thinking, he was thinking as well. The hat I'd seen had been a hat, after all, and the ghostly faces Miguel had thought he'd seen, just part of his nervous fears.

"Sort of overshot our mark, didn't we, son? Guess maybe we've got our killer. Only one thing to do—put Tonya in her room and keep her there, so's I can get to the Cove and do my telephoning. Taking her over ain't my job. The Lake City folks'll have to see to that."

We took Tonya to her room. She went quietly, stolidly, her hips swinging down the hall. Pedarson locked the door on her and gave me the key. Only Greyling and Solveig and I went downstairs together. Lars stayed behind. But not for long.

I knew what his errand had been when I saw the towel-wrapped thing he had in his hand when he joined us at last. The knife.

"Got the rest of the things in here," he explained, tapping the pockets of his long slicker. "Taking 'em over to the Cove with me. With Tonya confessing and all, don't suppose the Lake City folks will bother

much with fingerprints, but they'll want to try."

Morsson's revolver wasn't so bad, but remembering that oarlock with its strand of clinging hair, and what that knife upstairs had looked like, and thinking of walking around with them in my coat pocket, made the sweat come out on me. It was probably doing the same thing to Greyling, for he turned on Lars with a snarl.

"If you can't find one thing to talk about, you'll find another! You've got two corpses now—one murderer locked upstairs, and another dead, and still you're hanging around. If you aren't getting the proper help here, I am! Give me that boat key of yours!"

Lars didn't even bother to answer him. He didn't even look at him as he walked out of the room.

I caught up with him before he was off the steps.

"You don't think it might still be Lotta?" I asked. "That Tonya is just—well, trying to shield her. After all, she was Carla's twin, and Tonya raised her, too."

We were passing by the door of the cabin, then. Lars didn't answer my question. He said, "Wait a bit, son," and went inside. When he came out there was a funny look on his face, and he was chewing at his mustache as though he didn't mean to leave a hair.

"Well, Carla's got her ruby back," he said quietly. "Pete didn't even lift the shawl off her. It's lying there big as life, right on top, and where Tonya said it had to lie—over the poor dead thing's heart. I left it there. Mebbe it wasn't the right thing, but the Lake City folks can do what they want to about it when they come. And maybe you'd best forget about Lotta, son. There's some things don't check, about that

—and never have. Tonya, back there, is one of 'em. Don't think you'll have any trouble with her, but I could leave my gun with you if you thought you needed it."

I grinned at him. "That cannon? Keep it, Lars. I'd be a lot more scared at that than at Tonya!" I swung back to the house.

Greyling was walking back and forth on the veranda when I came up the steps. I said: "Where's Miss Thorsson?" He nodded surlily toward the living room. But I hadn't opened the door when he caught me. There was something crazy about the way his fingers dug into my sleeve. His voice was strained and tight.

"I know what you and Pedarson are up to. I'm no fool. You think Lotta is on this island, don't you? You think she's the death that's striking from the shadows? You're monkeying around, wasting your time on fool theories, and leaving that black witch up there in her room, planning how she can kill me. She hates me. I've told you that. She's always hated me because Carla loved me. I'll be the next one to go. Doors can't hold her back when she's ready to strike again. And do you think if she hadn't killed Miguel, she'd say she had, for Lotta's sake? Don't you realize there's only one thing that woman would lie for, or kill for? Carla. And Carla is dead."

I looked at him. I shook off his arm. My head was whirling again, but with something so mad now that even I couldn't face it alone. I had to think it out—talk it out with someone.

I left him there, going back to his endless pacing, and slammed the door on him.

Solveig was sitting on the couch before the fire. She'd been crying,

the tears still streaking her cheeks. I sat down beside her and covered her hands with mine. Held them tight.

I said: "There's something I want to tell you, Solveig. You'll think I'm out of my mind, but try and hear me through." And, conscious of that balcony with its thick-draped hangings, and the things that could hide there, I dropped my voice to a whisper and kept it there. I told her what Lars and I had thought. I told her what I was thinking now, hesitating between my words, working it out as I went along.

She thought I was out of my head at first, I guess, the way her eyes widened, and her hands strained against mine. But she wasn't thinking so when I'd finished. She was shivering against me, holding to me, hiding her face against my coat, as though the very room was crying its hidden horrors at her.

"I'm going to search this house, Lars or no Lars," I said. "I'm going to search every nook and corner of it, and I'm beginning upstairs. I'll start with your room and go right down the line. I probably won't find what I'm looking for, but I'll have the satisfaction of knowing that I've tried. Sitting here, thinking what we're both of us thinking now, and waiting for Lars and the police from Lake City to get here, will drive us both nuts."

From the beach below the windows, I heard the sound of Lars' motor warming up and, looking out, I saw it heading toward the Cove, breasting the white-capped waves, fighting its way against them. And I said: "I wish to God, now, that I had taken that gun he offered me!" And I could have bitten off my tongue, when I saw Solveig's face.

She was all for dropping the thing, then. Begging, pleading, hanging to

me. And when that was no use, she said she was going with me, and if there was any searching done, we'd do it together. And I couldn't change her mind.

I'd caught up a poker from the fireplace when I started, but after a thought, I put it down. A big six-foot-two hulk of a man, starting out to look for a dream—with a poker! And if the dream wasn't a dream—well, there'd been killing enough on this island. I wasn't adding any more to it.

We began with Solveig's room. We pulled dresses out of the closets, looked under the bed, pushed draperies away from the window. And we took the other rooms in line, not even passing Miguel's up.

I did Miguel's alone. Solveig was willing enough to stand outside in the hall. God! That poor kid, lying there with the blood drying on him, and me, pawing through things that he's never use again.

It didn't take me long. There was no trace there of the thing I was hunting so foolishly for. I hadn't thought there would be, but I wasn't letting anything slip. I'd started this, and I was going through with it.

I searched Greyling's room, the closet with its neatly racked clothes, its shoes toe to toe on the floor. I spent little time there. It was in the big room that had been Thors-son's and his wife's where I went over things with a fine-tooth comb, with Solveig to help me.

We worked noiselessly, talking in whispers. We did a thorough job and when we had finished we looked at each other. Solveig's eyes were bright, and there were feverish spots burning high on her cheeks.

"Her black housecoat—the one with the long sleeves—it's gone! And the slippers that went with it.

Tonya made them for her—satin like the coat, and satin soles. They're gone, too. And her diamond rings and a bracelet that dad gave her. She kept them in that box on the dresser with her money. Look, it's empty!"

My hand went into my pocket, to close around the key of Tonya's door.

"O. K.," I said grimly. "O. K., Solveig. It's Tonya's room now. And keep out of this. This is a man's job!"

"Try and keep me out!" And her chin shot out the way I'd seen it at the Cove. "Just try, Dennis O'Hara!"

I didn't. I gave her arm a squeeze, kissed her once, and we walked together around the corner of the passage to Tonya's door.

XIII.

I had the key ready in my hand. I put it in the lock. I said: "O'Hara, Tonya. I'm coming in." I waited a second, and when there was no answer, turned the key and pushed the door wide.

It was a large room, covering the entire kitchen el—a room with a low, sloping roof, and two windows. It was as clean as hands could keep it, but bare as a barn. A cot bed in one corner. A washstand with its pitcher and bowl, and a cracked mirror above. There was no closet—just an old wardrobe, its curtain drawn back to show Tonya's few clothes hanging from hooks inside.

It took only a glance to see it all—but the glance began with Tonya and ended there.

At the side of the room, where the sloping ceiling lay not waist high from the floor, there was a long, crude altar, holding a squat, inscrutable god, with Tonya, looking

like another, on her knees before it, so lost in her mumbling that she hadn't heard me open the door.

The altar—if you could call it that—was only a couple of boards nailed to the wall, with another board laid across the top. It was the cloth that made it what it was—an altar to a god. It needs a woman to describe that thing. I can't. I wouldn't try. Savage, barbaric, dragged down by its weight of gold-and-silver thread until it swept the floor.

I went straight to it. I said, "I'm sorry, Tonya, but we're searching the house. I'll have to look under there." If eyes could have killed me then, I would have been dead. Tonya's eyes were snake's eyes; black with darting hate, and as savage as the god she had been worshipping, as I lifted that cloth from the floor.

There wasn't a thing there but the clean, scrubbed boards. But I wasn't satisfied with that.

"This ceiling doesn't end here—it has to go out to the eaves," I told Solveig. "Maybe there's a cubby-hole behind there, somewhere." And I jerked at the altar to see if it would move.

It gave a little, and my heart was pounding like a trip hammer as I braced myself to jerk again.

That was when I saw Greyling, standing in the door of the room.

"Still trying to make a big guy of yourself, O'Hara? Still hunting for the shadow that isn't here to find? Thought you'd like to know that while you've been playing the fool up here and unlocking the door on a murderer, Borsch has put one over on you.

"Met him about five minutes ago on the beach. He's got about a gallon of good Scotch inside him, a tin patch over that rowboat on the beach, and an old motor he had in

the boathouse hitched to it and warming right now. He's come back to the house—so he boasted—for something Lars and Tonya scared out of him this morning. Something, I take it, that he left in the care of Carla, while you folks were listening to the radio in the living room, and Miguel was being killed upstairs.

"I don't give a hoot in hell about Borsch, or the ruby, but, if you do, I have a feeling Pete took a detour around by the way of the kitchen to load up on a supply of whiskey, and if you wanted to make a dash for it you might catch him, right about now, in the cabin. Just a suggestion, you know."

That was when it happened—the thing it has taken me so long to tell.

The last word hadn't left Steve's twisting lips before that altar was slamming back on me with a crash that knocked me five feet away and landed me on the floor.

I doubt, even had I been standing during that first crazy second, that I would have done anything more than Solveig and Greyling did. Stand frozen, stiff, stricken. For that altar had framed a door—the sort that carpenters sometimes leave as access to a sloping roof, and out of the black, yawning hole it had hidden, the shadow was striking again!

A white ghost face with black, streaming hair—a face made bodyless by the long black robe beneath it; feet that made no sound, but that carried that white face some way, by us and through us, and out of that door to the wide front stairs!

I saw Solveig starting after it. I heard the pound of Greyling's shoes and lunged to my feet to follow, fighting off a mountain of flesh that had fallen, like a snarling, spitting volcano, on me.

I had never struck a woman in my life. But I landed one on Tonya, then. A haymaker, right to the jaw. I didn't even look back to see what had happened to her. I'd lost too much time already.

The shadow was heading for the cabin and that ruby. Solveig and Greyling would go that way. And they'd be too late. For the shadow wasn't stopping there.

The beach! That was the place—the beach and that boat Borsch had ready and waiting! If Solveig and Greyling missed out at the cabin, I'd be in time to block it there.

I took the short cut that Solveig had told about the night before. I didn't run down it—I threw myself down. When I missed my footing I slid, until I could find it again. But, fast as I had gone, one glance at the beach stretched before me showed me I was too late.

The rowboat was tied to the pier, as Borsch had said it would be, with the old engine he had fitted to it, purring and humming, but Borsch wasn't in it! A slender figure in a clinging black dress with long hair that the wind had caught and was tossing in a dark veil around her, was tearing the rope away, and taking her place behind the wheel.

As my sneakers struck the sand and started across it, Greyling and Solveig burst out of the hill path and began running, too. We were together when we reached the end of the pier, and the boat had already swung to breast the waves that were hitting at it.

It must have been out fifty feet, maybe more, before the figure at the wheel brought the engine to an idling drone and turning, gave us her face, for the first time.

It was the face Solveig and I had known we would see. Were prepared to see. But Greyling! I'll

never want to hear again the agony, the horror, the love, the hate that his one wild "Carla!" held. I never will. Nor the mocking, devilish laughter that answered it.

She had risen to her feet now, balanced against the boat's crazy rockings, and the sun which had broken through the clouds at last was shining on the silver chain she shook at us, to turn its dangling pendant into a blaze of unholy fire.

"Carla!" she mocked. "Yes, Carla Mendez, spitting at you. Fools! Fools! Laughing at you! Look at me! Look hard! You'll never see me again. Look at my beautiful ruby! Mine! You'll never see it, either. That thing back in the cabin with her ugly face—she'll tell you what happened to her when she tried to take it away from me! And *him*—ask him what happened, when he dared to doubt that it was Carla lying there, and came in the night to see! Ask Miguel what happened to him when he doubted, too. Ask him about the shadow he found in his room, and what she did to him! Ask that drunken beast up in the cabin what he thinks of the shadow now!

"Oh, it's been fun, spying on you, listening to you fighting with each other! I've laughed and laughed. I've held my sides back in Tonya's room, and laughed until I hurt! I'm laughing now. Hear me! Laughing!"

It was Greyling who saw the huge wave that caught her boat then, and drowned that laughter forever. And Greyling who screamed his warning—too late.

Neither Solveig nor I was seeing anything but that face, nor hearing anything but the sound of that awful laughter, until suddenly, where the boat had been, there was nothing but a mountain of green, white-crested water; and where the

laughter had been, only a gurgling cry that moaned for an instant and was gone.

I caught Greyling just as he stripped off his coat and started to dive. He fought me like a madman.

"She can't swim! Let me go! She can't swim a stroke. She's a devil, but I love her! Let me go! I can't let her die like that!"

And I said, holding his flailing arms: "Wouldn't you rather have her die fighting, than . . . in the chair, with a black cap over her head? Look!" And I pointed to what none of us had seen before—two launches coming down the lake, still too far away to hail, but not too far to recognize. The first one was Pedarson's, and the other, not three feet behind, the police launch from Lake City.

"And besides," I added gently, for the man's eyes held the tortures of the damned, "the undertow has caught her by now and, running as it is, she'd be two miles down the lake before you could make the spot where she went under."

Carla's body was ten miles down the lake when the searchers found it at last. It had lain for a long time, caught in a bunch of lily pads, and horrible as Lotta had looked the night we carried her dead body up Mantrap hill, I think that her sister might have envied her. For Carla had neither beauty then, nor the ruby she had fought to keep. She had lost them both to a power as soulless as herself, and stronger.

The rest? There is so little left to tell, and most of that we got from Lars. He had met the police boat on his way to the Cove, out on a search for the woman missing from the steamer. He had intercepted them and brought them to the island,

for the same truth had burst on him that had on me.

Once we had gone back up to the cabin and found Pete stunned—not dead, and able to walk back to the house and the hope of whiskey it held, under his own power; and while Greyling was in his room packing his bags to leave, Lars told us—Solveig and me—just what that burst of truth had shown him.

It was uncanny, checking up afterward with Tonya's story at the inquest, how close the old man had come.

"Hadh't been ten minutes away from the island," he grunted, "before I knowed it was Carla we ought 'a' been looking for all along. Plain as the nose on your face. I tell you, it fair screamed at me. I'd 'a' come back, but long's I'd started, I figgered it'd be best to get the police down, who'd have a right to arrest her when they found her. Anyone but a dumb old fool like me would've seen it from the first. Trouble was there was too many clues, and all pointing to too many people.

"That hat you saw, for instance, Dennis—that said Lotta plain as day, but that poor thing hadn't any grudge against Thorsson, and she sure hadn't none against Miguel. And, somehow, I couldn't see her bashing her sister's face in, after she'd killed her. She'd 'a' spent that time hunting for the ruby she wanted. Every time I tried to tie things up to her, something would pop up, and yell, 'Ain't so,' at me. Got so bad that when Tonya sprung her confession, I thought I'll forget it. Call it a day! But once I got out on the lake, and let the wind blow the fog out of me, I had the whole picture—everything.

"Carla down there on the beach, and Lotta in that bathing suit she'd been wearing on the steamer, watch-

ing from the bushes, waiting till she got her alone. Telling Carla she'd come back to get even with her, and take her locket and chain, and Carla grabbing up that oarlock and hitting her with it. And seeing maybe how much her sister looked like her, and thinking what it meant—a chance to play an ugly joke on everybody and get away with the thing she said was hers. To let the world think she was dead, and not to be dead at all.

"That ruby, now—I figger she didn't know it was gone, maybe, until she'd stripped off the poor thing's bathing suit and dressed her in her own dress. Doing that would take time, and she hadn't very much. She knew you were out with the launch, Dennis, and liable to come back any minute. The way I see it, she had to work fast. And after she was done, there were those few little extra fancy touches she had to give the poor critter's face. Lotta hadn't had as easy a life as she'd had in the last year or so. It probably showed. It was when that was over that she probably realized the necklace was gone, and began scratching around for it, with Borsch stepping out from the boathouse and seeing her, and your launch coming in, and making her run.

"She must have suspected Borsch had it—hiding around the house, the way she was, with Tonya to look after her, and spy with her. She could 'a' killed him easy, but she was too smart for that. She knew, the way we did, that wouldn't get her ruby back. 'Stead she got Tonya to work for her. And played ghost to Miguel till he was scared sick.

"Ain't no use talking, I blame myself pretty hard, Miss Solveig. If I'd been smart like I ought to've been, your pa might be alive now,

and that poor boy, too. No—I'm just an old man, and a tired one. I'm turning in my badge."

He did turn it in, the day the inquest was over, and nothing Solveig and I could say would change him.

Lars and his badge will always be a fine memory to me, but Lars in his Sunday best, taking Solveig's dead father's place at our wedding, will stay with me always, a much finer and happier one.

James Thorsson lies in the tiny green cemetery at the Cove, and Miguel and Lotta lie with him. Solveig wanted it that way.

Tonya is back in Mexico, where she took the body of the one she loved. That poor body that hasn't even its precious ruby to comfort it now.

Mantrap is closed. A dreary place now, of blood and shame and bitter memories. Perhaps, sometime, we may open it once more. Perhaps, sometime, laughter will come from its shadowy balcony—not murder. But I don't know.

We are happy as we are, Solveig and I. We want to stay that way. Six months since we've been married. I'll have my degree in June. We have furnished rooms just off the campus, and the youth is back in Solveig's face once more. It's sweet to see it there.

Oh, I'm a rich woman's husband, living on my wife's money. I agree to that. But it won't always be so. And even if it had to be—what would that matter, against Solveig's need for me, and mine for her?

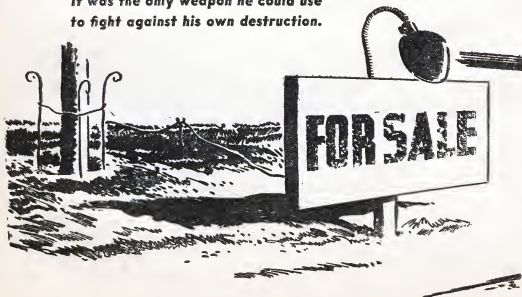
Things like money, who has it, or whether you have it all, can look pretty petty to two people who love each other and have been through what Solveig and I have, together.

THE END.



MR. MYRTLE'S IMAGINATION

*It was the only weapon he could use
to fight against his own destruction.*





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by ROBERT ARTHUR

Except that he suffered from sinus every winter, and so was anxious to sell his house in Elm Street and move to Florida, there was nothing noteworthy about Henry Myrtle. Unless it was his imagination. Henry Myrtle had quite a vivid imagination.

And at this moment, as he peered from his dark living room, through the front bay window into the street, it was working actively.

For coming his way down the elm-lined thoroughfare was a large sedan, moving slowly, as if the occupants were having trouble finding a particular number—a common difficulty in Elm Street, where house numbers were invisible at night and every residence, due to a pleasant whim on the part of the contractor who had erected them, was an exact duplicate of every other.

Henry Myrtle could not help imagining the occupants of the oncoming car were looking for 315, the residence of Henry Myrtle, retired.

The car approached slowly. At last it came abreast of the house—and stopped. A powerful flashlight played over his small front porch, fastened to the number there, then winked out. The car picked up speed and moved on, was swiftly lost to sight.

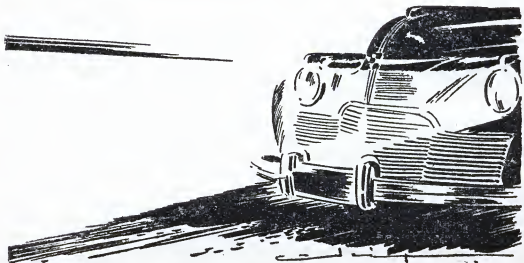
A little chill whisked down Henry Myrtle's spine.

It hadn't been imagination at all. They *had* been looking for 315!

And Mr. Myrtle was quite positive that the car had come by so the men in it would know just where to find him, in case presently they decided to kill him!

After a time, Mr. Myrtle got a bottle of beer from the kitchen and, sipping it, tried to read the paper. He couldn't, though. Not even the comics. Nothing but the final paragraphs of the story on Page 3, which said:

District Attorney Winston is rushing Bright Eyes Benning to trial before the end of the month. The district at-



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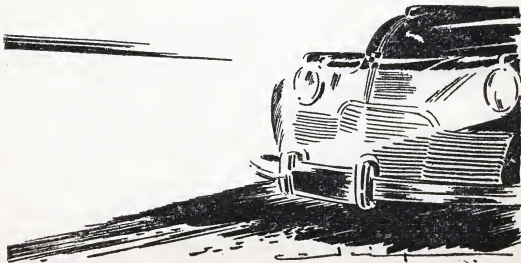
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District Attorney Winston is rushing Bright Eyes Benning to trial before the end of the month. The district at-



torney is confident of convicting Benning for the murder last Friday of John Douglas, bank messenger, in full view of luncheon-hour shoppers in State Street.

The shooting of Douglas and the theft of a hundred thousand dollars in negotiable securities that he carried was managed so deftly that despite the surrounding throngs, apparently no one obtained the killer's description. District Attorney Winston's office hints, however, that it has a secret witness who not only positively identified Benning as the killer, but actually saw the mysterious "higher-up" who gave him his final orders.

"The man behind Benning is the man we really want," the district attorney stated. "We are confident that all these recent crimes in which bank messengers and pay masters have been held up and shot have been planned by one man, the man in the gray suit who gave Benning his orders Friday. We've got a clue to him at last, and we're not going to stop until we get him."

Henry Myrtle swallowed hard and put down the paper. Secret witness—clue to the higher-up at last. It read well. Impressively. Dramatically. But it wasn't so impressive and dramatic when you knew that the secret witness was only plump little Henry Myrtle, whose one ambition was to sell his house for six thousand dollars—it had cost seven—so he could afford to move to Florida, where his sinuses wouldn't bother him.

At least, it wasn't impressive or dramatic to Henry Myrtle. It was just frightening.

In his mind, he went back three days. To Friday noon. He was sitting in his old coupé, parked on Seventh maybe twenty feet from State. He'd come down for the latest magazines, and was just sitting for a moment, watching people go by. And as he watched, two men had sauntered past. One fairly tall, neatly dressed, sharp-featured, with glittering eyes—Bright Eyes!

The other man— But that was

the curious thing about him. He was so hard to recall. He was of medium height, medium weight, wore a medium dark-gray suit. Beyond that, Mr. Myrtle couldn't remember a single thing.

The two had paused, looking down State Street. Then Gray Suit had made a motion with his hand. Bright Eyes had turned back down Seventh, Gray Suit crossing to the opposite curb.

Then a moment later, Bright Eyes had sauntered back, seeming immersed in a newspaper. He had reached the corner just in time to bump into a clean-cut young man with a brief case chained to his wrist.

And even though he had been watching, Mr. Myrtle had almost missed what followed. Bright Eyes had lowered his paper. One hand, holding something the paper hid, thrust forward. There was a small popping sound.

The young bank messenger had begun to crumple, an expression of terrible surprise in his eyes.

As he fell, the tall man caught him, thrust him back against the stone side of the corner building, held him there in a manner that made it look to a casual passer-by as if they were having a friendly talk.

Meanwhile, his free hand thrust the gun into a pocket and brought forth small clippers. These nipped the links of the chain. Bright Eyes snatched the brief case, and in three steps was gone, lost in the throng crossing the street.

So swiftly did he move, that he was gone before his victim crumpled and fell, before Henry Myrtle, realizing he had seen murder committed, could get the door of his coupé open.

Mr. Myrtle had not waited for the

police to come. Not bothering about his car, he'd hurried straight to police headquarters, two blocks away, told his story to the chief of detectives, and in turn had been taken into the district attorney's office. The D. A., a large man, who seemed intelligent, had sworn him to secrecy and told him that, except to identify Benning when caught—the description of the bright, glittering eyes had been all the chief of detectives needed—he would not be called into the office at all before the trial.

He did not say so, but Mr. Myrtle knew he meant he wanted no one to know that Mr. Myrtle was a witness, because—well, sometimes things happened to witnesses.

Benning had been picked up the next day. Going to the jail and leaving again secretly by a side entrance, Henry Myrtle had identified him. Since then he had not been in touch with the D. A. Not more than five men in the district attorney's office and the police department knew his name, or of his existence.

But Gray Suit knew!

Almost interestedly, Mr. Myrtle wondered how he'd learned. Either he had a spy at headquarters, or else he'd seen Mr. Myrtle's car standing there at the time of the holdup, realized Henry Myrtle was a witness, took down the number, and found out who owned it.

But that part hardly mattered. What mattered was that Gray Suit and his gang of killers knew the name and address of the witness whose testimony would send Bright Eyes Benning to the electric chair.

Knowing, what would they do?

Mr. Myrtle's imagination began to work again, unpleasantly. Since he had retired as an accountant when Martha died, two years before, and now seldom went out, they'd seek him at his home. Like most Elm

Streeters, he sat in his easy-chair by the front bay window after supper, reading the paper. So some night while he was sitting reading, that big car would come by. In the quiet dusk a machine gun would stutter. A shower of leaden slugs would crash through the bay window and—

Henry Myrtle shook his head at this point, to dispel the ugly picture in his mind. That was what would have happened if he hadn't seen that car tonight. Now, forewarned, it was his job to see it didn't. But how?

Of course, he could tell the district attorney and he would give him a bodyguard. A bodyguard! Someone around night and day! No privacy. And all Elm Street would know within a day that something unusual was going on. They'd soon guess what. Then the whole city would know. There'd be reporters, callers, curiosity-seekers—

Mr. Myrtle shuddered. No, he didn't want a bodyguard.

Or he could move to a hotel until after the trial.

But Gray Suit was clever. He'd locate him.

Or he might leave the city. Go up into the mountains. Except that he didn't have the money. Still, the city might pay his expenses. But again Gray Suit might trail him. If he had a confederate at headquarters, it would be like walking into a trap to try hiding, in the city or out.

No, he was as safe at home as anywhere, and the fact they didn't know he knew he was in danger was more protection than a bodyguard. Besides, it was at least two weeks to the trial, and Mr. Myrtle rather imagined that they would plan to kill him only as a last resort, after they had failed in every other effort to get Benning free legally. So probably he had several days of grace,

anyway. Maybe before they were up, he could think of something.

After all, Martha herself had said, just before she died, when she urged him to retire and move to Florida and perhaps try his hand at writing fiction, that he had a good imagination.

But one day passed, then two, and he really had not thought of anything helpful. The big car had not returned. No one, as far as he could tell, was watching him. But all the same he felt hemmed in, like a trapped animal.

Finishing the dinner dishes, Mr. Myrtle wiped his hands. Many thoughts were spinning in his mind as he walked through the living room to the hall and let himself out the front door. Thoughts of Florida, and of selling the house, of Gray Suit and the fact that even if he did manage to outwit Gray Suit and his killers until after the trial, he would never be safe as long as he stayed in the city. Gray Suit was a killer, ruthless, and he would exact vengeance even if Bright Eyes Benning was convicted and executed.

Mr. Myrtle knew that, intuitively. So he had to sell the house and leave. But he couldn't unless he could get the six thousand dollars for it, to pay off the mortgage that he was still obligated by, and at the present time there was almost no hope of getting six thousand, so—

His thoughts running around in unhappy circles, Mr. Myrtle trudged down his short walk to the street and looked back at his house. It was, of course, exactly like every other house in the block, except for the "For Sale" sign standing to the right of the porch steps.

Two or three other houses on the street had "For Sale" signs on their lawns, but only his was lighted. An old gooseneck lamp was fastened to

it, a long cord running through a cellar window to a socket. Every night until he went to bed the sign impressed on the world that 315 might be bought.

But now he was wondering. Anxious though he was to sell, he wondered if he hadn't better take the sign down. For lighted, it picked 315 out of the anonymity all the other houses enjoyed after dark. Like a beacon it made it possible to come straight to Henry Myrtle's residence without hesitation, be your errand good or evil.

But if he removed the sign, that might indicate he was nervous. If he was nervous, they would realize it was because he knew he was in danger. And his only hope lay in the fact they thought him unsuspicious.

So he had decided to leave the sign as it was when his new next-door neighbor came across the lawn to greet him.

He'd seen the other moving in about noon, with four or five suitcases and a bag of golf clubs. Mr. Myrtle had not been surprised, for the house next door had been vacant several weeks and, of course, someone would rent it sooner or later.

This, however, was his first chance to inspect his new neighbor closely. He saw a bulky man, of middle height, dressed in a sporty tropical-worsted suit, with linen tie and tan-and-white shoes.

"Good evening, neighbor," the other boomed heartily. "I'm Jackson Davis. Just moved in today. Thought I'd get acquainted. Nice little street here. Liked it first time I saw it. Knew my wife would, too. She's away just now. Northern Michigan. Suffers from hay fever. Be back in a month."

He paused to catch his breath. Henry Myrtle introduced himself.

"Myrtle, eh?" Jackson Davis boomed. "How about dropping in for a cold beer?"

After hesitating a moment, Mr. Myrtle agreed. He'd been too much by himself lately. It would do him good to talk to someone.

They had the beer. Jackson Davis managed to tell his whole life story, from boyhood to the present moment, including his and his wife's illnesses. He sold life insurance. He liked golf, beer, and Hedy Lamarr. He thought Elm Street a mighty nice little street.

Mr. Myrtle was a trifle dizzy when he finished the beer and excused himself. Davis had not stopped talking for more than five consecutive seconds. He was a sociable man.

During the next few days, Mr. Myrtle and Jackson Davis got well acquainted. During those same days, Bright Eyes Benning's trial sped closer. It had been set for ten days off. The ten days sped as no ten days in Henry Myrtle's life had ever sped. Still Gray Suit had made no move. It would come soon, though.

But thanks to Jackson Davis and their evening chats, Mr. Myrtle found himself in almost good spirits as the fatal deadline approached. Fatal, for every legal trick to free Benning or delay his trial had failed. His good-natured neighbor kept Mr. Myrtle from becoming a prey to his own thoughts. They discussed a variety of things, including the coming trial, which was given prominence in the papers.

"Well," Jackson Davis said, three or four evenings before the trial's opening, "I see they're still talking about that secret witness." He poured them both more beer. "Now just suppose, Myrtle, that you were that witness. What would you do,

knowing that a gang of killers was probably gunning for you? Me, I wouldn't stand on the order of my going. I'd just go. To other parts."

Henry Myrtle swallowed half his beer before answering.

"No"—he shook his head—"you'd stay and testify. So would I. We can't give in to thieves and killers, no matter how they try to scare us."

"I suppose you're right," Jackson Davis boomed. "Probably I'd stay. But say they didn't try to kill you. Say someone slipped you a big wad of dough.

"Now, you've told me that you and your wife always planned to make a trip to South America, Hawaii, places like that; then to settle down in Florida. You say she told you, before she died, to be sure and do all that sometime, just as if she were with you.

"So, suppose they slipped you enough money to do all that; things you might never be able to do otherwise. All you had to do was take the cash and hit the road. That would be a different problem."

Henry Myrtle considered while he finished the beer.

"Yes," he said, at last, "but I still think we'd both stay. A man couldn't enjoy anything bought with such money, knowing he'd sold all his self-respect to get it."

"Well, you're right again," Jackson Davis chuckled deeply, opening still more beer. "But, just the same, I'm glad I'm not this witness they're talking about. Now take this guy in the gray suit, they say is the brains of the gang. Y'know how I picture him—a quiet man, kind of gray-faced, gray clothes, never raising his voice, his eyes gray and cold. The sort of fellow that gives you the creeps just to think about."

"That's the way I've pictured him, too," Mr. Myrtle acknowledged,

quaffing the fresh beer. "Quiet, but terribly, ruthlessly clever. A man who tends to every important detail in his plans himself, so nothing can go wrong."

"Right, brother!" Jackson Davis agreed. "Believe me, I'm glad I'm not that witness. Imagine how he must feel, never knowing when a gun may go off, a bullet plunk into him. Never knowing—"

Henry Myrtle shook his head.

"No," he said, "I don't think it would be that bad. To murder the witness is practically an admission of guilt. So, as I see it, Gray Suit, being clever, will try everything else first. And when finally he decides, as I suppose he must have by now, that he has to kill the witness, he'll try to figure an angle, a twist. Something to confuse the case, muddle the jury, give Benning's lawyer a toe hold to work on; something to cover up the obvious admission of guilt contained in eliminating a witness."

"Such as what, Brother Myrtle?" Jackson Davis asked, looking interested.

Henry Myrtle thought for a moment, then brightened. "Well, something like this. Suppose I were Gray Suit"—he tapped his chest—"and I wanted to rub out Henry Myrtle of 315 Elm Street. I'd do it, of course, but—and here's the twist—I'd plant something on him at the same time. Some money, let's say. A mighty suspicious lot of it. Maybe a couple of thousand dollars. And with it, a ticket to some far-off place. Hawaii, the Philippines, China!

"Then see the confusion that would follow! Here's a dead witness who was about to skip out of town, his pockets full of money, bound for the other side of the globe. Who paid him to skip? And who shot him? Not the same people cer-

tainly; that wouldn't be logical.

"So there's doubt, confusion, questions. Somebody's been double-crossing somebody else. Maybe the authorities are trying to put something over. Everybody is suspicious, puzzled, doubtful. See? There's no logical answer, but a good defense attorney could spin a dozen theories to make a jury dizzy, even if none of them made sense. So that's what I'd do, if I were Gray Suit."

"Brother Myrtle!" Jackson Davis made an owlish bow. "You're amazing. Say, maybe you are Gray Suit! What a brain you've got! I do believe you're right. It would be marvelously confusing. But I daresay the fellow is absolutely safe. Paper says his identity is a secret, and if it wasn't, if he didn't know perfectly well he was safe, he'd be under guard."

"That's it," Henry Myrtle agreed, raising his glass. "He's probably as unworried as I am." He grinned wryly at his own secret joke, and raised his glass. "Well, *prosit*."

"*Prosit!*" his neighbor grinned back.

But for all his light talk, Henry Myrtle was not unworried. The next night and the next he avoided the subject of the trial. It was too hard to talk about casually. And then it was Sunday. The trial took place on Monday. The moment of decision was at hand. That night whatever was going to happen would happen.

He was on edge, of course. Every nerve was taut, and it was an effort to even drink coffee. But he knew at last what he was going to do. He was neither going to run nor hide at the last minute. If Gray Suit and his men came after him, let them. He'd stay right there, by the window, and try to trap them all. That would

be turning the tables with a vengeance, being the bait in a trap they set themselves, snaring the deadly Gray Suit through the man's own disregard for human life!

It was a thought that appealed to Mr. Myrtle's imagination. It was dangerous, of course. But then, just living was dangerous.

So that when the district attorney phoned him, about supper time, he answered in a steady voice.

"No," he said, "I'm not nervous. No, there haven't been any strangers around at all. Just the same I have a hunch they may have learned who I am, and it's just possible they might come tonight. So there's something I think we ought to try.

"I'm going to act just as usual. I'm going to sit at my window and read. If they do come, I'll duck. But if you were to have several police cars hidden well out of sight, down the side streets from each end of this block, we might be able to trap them, providing they do come.

"No, positively, you mustn't search or stop any cars coming into this block. Let them come. Only have the radio cars close in fast if they hear shooting. And you may bag the whole lot of them, if they try to get me."

It took a little talking, but in the end he won his point. Then he hung up. And by an effort managed to eat something.

After that, he hung his coat in the hall and sat down by the bay window with the Sunday papers.

It was swelteringly hot. Every Elm Streeter was sitting as close to the open window as he could. Everything was quite normal. Dusk settled gently. And just before it was dark, Jackson Davis dropped over.

Henry Myrtle, of course, did not want him there tonight. He pleaded a sick headache and said he was go-

ing to sit by the window for an hour or two. Maybe the breeze would help.

"Well," Davis said sympathetically, "I'm sorry to hear that. Hope it goes away. Well, I'll go back to my own igloo and sit by the window, too. The rest of the house is hotter than an oven. Anything I can do for you before I go?"

"Thanks, no." Mr. Myrtle shook his head. "Unless you'd turn the switch in the hall by the door. That lights up my 'For Sale' sign."

"Glad to, neighbor," Jackson Davis rumbled, and clumped out. He paused in the hall, and the switch clicked. Then he went out. Henry Myrtle was alone. To wait.

He waited, but only for another twenty minutes. It was then quite dark. Elm Street had faded into a series of lighted windows, the lawns black wells of shadow. Henry Myrtle left his chair, went through the kitchen, eased himself out the back door, and, crouching low, moved toward the front of his own house.

He was in stocking feet, and a cat could not have gone more unseen.

Beside his own steps, he paused a moment. The street was clear in both directions. No one was on the sidewalk. He could see Jackson Davis through the corner of his neighbor's front window, sitting in an easy-chair, drinking beer, mopping his forehead.

Mr. Myrtle drew back into the shadows, and for sixty seconds worked in busy silence. Then, sure that no one had seen him, he scuttled back to his own rear door and let himself in again.

Once inside, breathing fast, he took his place in the chair by the window and resumed his wait.

This time the wait was longer. It stretched out to forty minutes before dimmed headlights swung into

the block, and a heavy car slipped down the street toward 315.

Henry Myrtle held his breath. His throat was dry, and the pulse pounded in his temples.

The big car slid nearer.

Henry Myrtle dug his nails into his palms until the blood came.

The car was but one house down.

Henry Myrtle stiffened in anticipation.

Then a rolling drumfire of shots tore open the quiet night. Red eyes winked and blinked within the car. A deep reverberating roar woke Elm Street. Glass tinkled and fell. A man screamed, once. A scream cut short and drowned out by machine-gun fire.

Then the red eyes ceased winking. There was a stunning silence, broken only by the clash of gears as the big car sped forward. The silence did not last long, though. As the big car reached the end of the block, an abrupt staccato of shots ripped out again. Then more shots, a double scream, groans as machines crashed.

After that the silence remained disturbed for quite a time by excited voices and rushing feet.

Mr. Myrtle rose from the floor, to which he had dropped involuntarily when the firing began. He slid on his shoes. Then he hurried into the hall and put on his coat.

As he did, he hesitated. There was something in the pocket that had not been there when he had taken it off.

Surprised scarcely at all, Mr. Myrtle investigated.

It was a large envelope. Inside the envelope was two thousand dollars in hundred-dollar bills, and a ticket on a boat sailing from New York the next day at noon. The boat was bound on a six-month cruise around South America to the Pacific, touching at Hawaii, the

Philippines, India, Australia, Bali and all the glamorous ports of the South Seas.

He peered out through the glass in the front door. There was an increasing throng outside, but they were not gathered before 315.

He did not hesitate. Jamming on his hat, he slipped out the back door to his garage, which opened onto an alley behind the house. He got the car out unnoticed and quietly drove off down the alley.

Fifteen minutes later he was well out of town, headed south toward New York City. He could buy what he needed there and store the car. It was only a five-hour drive. He'd have plenty of time before the boat sailed.

In a few weeks he could write to his real-estate broker to accept the next offer made for 315 Elm Street. Five thousand would be enough, or even a little less, under the circumstances. Someone was sure to offer that much.

When the boat returned, Mr. Myrtle would settle in Florida.

It wasn't as if they needed him now to convict Bright Eyes Benning. They had the whole gang, including the master mind himself, Gray Suit. He'd done his duty; they wouldn't mind his leaving now. Besides, Martha had always insisted that he must some day take such a trip, to the glamorous places of the earth, just as they would have done together if she had lived.

Very briefly then, Mr. Myrtle's thoughts returned to the scene he had just quitted. He wondered if anyone had seen his "For Sale" sign wink out briefly as he had unscrewed the bulb. He wondered if anyone noticed, when the light came on again a minute later, that the sign had been moved forty feet east.

He wondered just how they would

explain it when someone finally did notice that his lighted sign, the veritable beacon toward which his would-be killers had headed directly in the darkness, now stood close beside the steps of the house next door, recently rented by an individual calling himself Jackson Davis.

Jackson Davis, of course, would offer no helpful suggestions. Jackson Davis, who had been sitting by the window drinking beer and watching for that car to come past, ready to signal it away if anything had gone wrong or there had been any sign of police in hiding about Mr. Myrtle's house, was quite dead.

Perhaps, though, one of the killers the police had caught would tell them that Jackson Davis, who dressed so loudly, talked so much, was such a convincing good neighbor, and Gray Suit, the quiet, ruthlessly clever killer were the same person.

As Mr. Myrtle's imagination had informed him some days before, after logic had told him it was not natural that no one should come by to make sure he hadn't moved or gone into hiding. Mr. Myrtle's imagination had readily pierced the camouflage of boisterous conversation and loud clothing when he

realized that he must be under watch—and there was only one person who could be watching him.

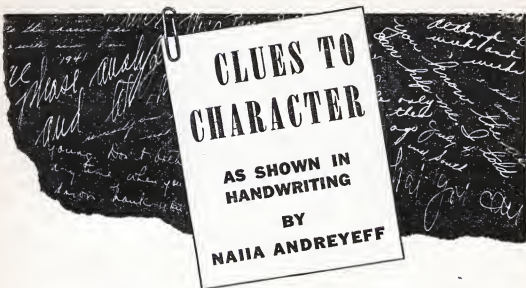
And when Jackson Davis had sounded him out, only a few nights before, to discover if he could be scared or bribed into running away, Mr. Myrtle had really needed no more confirmation. Promptly, he had let his imagination soar. With really exceptional results. Such as a lighted "For Sale" sign standing in front of the wrong house, to lead a car of killers into making a very justifiable error. And an envelope with two thousand dollars and a ticket to far-away places in his pocket.

Henry Myrtle, as he remembered that ticket, completely forgot Jackson Davis, alias Gray Suit, the misplaced sign, and the attempt to kill him. His imagination sped ahead of him. In his mind's eye, he saw Diamond Head rising from the horizon at dawn. He saw native girls in grass skirts dancing the gay and naughty hula. He saw many things that he had read about in books, but which soon his eyes would behold in all their glamorous actuality.

Mr. Myrtle really did, as his wife Martha had often said, have an excellent imagination.

THE END.





How well do you know yourself? How well do you know others? Here is a medium to help you gain knowledge of human nature. Knowing how to analyze character from handwriting will enable you to make your contacts with people pleasant and interesting. You can easily learn handwriting analysis in a practical and logical way by studying the following article. Other articles on this fascinating subject will appear every month in the pages of this magazine.

It is interesting to note that handwriting shows almost at a glance whether emotions rule you, causing ups and downs in your life and making you appear as changeable as spring weather, or if you keep your feet on the ground and take time to reason things out when provoked.

How mature you are emotionally shows in the basic line of your handwriting, and in the "angle of inclination," as someone so aptly christened it.

To start with, write a sentence on unruled paper and draw a straight line closely under each line of writing. In this way you will find out

if your handwriting stays on the line, or if it wavers below and above it. Then take into consideration whether your handwriting slants moderately forward to the right, or if your writing is upright, or if it leans to the left. This is the angle of inclination and shows whether you are warm-hearted and affectionate, or cold and unbending, or if you are ardent and emotional but likely to keep it to yourself.

There are people who can write at any angle they choose. They can write a natural-looking backhand, or use the average forward slant so well that no one would ever suspect they can write any other way. This is not always a commendable quality. It shows constant mental activity. This is fine. But it also shows changeableness in thoughts, ideas and desires, moods that come and go and make the writer appear unstable, flighty, hard to understand.

This ability to write equally well in various ways indicates a person who is apt to be as others want him to be. All things to all men, as it were. However, this is not the same thing as when we see two or more slants in one handwriting. If studied

closely, most handwritings will show two or three slants. This tends to make the personality more interesting.

Getting back to the basic line, if it is fairly straight (A) you may become as impatient and aggravated as people whose emotions come up for air with the least encouragement, but you will make an effort to handle a situation as sensibly and calmly as

you can. You will at least try not to let every incident affect you emotionally to the extent that you are a total wreck for a while, and you will instinctively want to keep your head above water at all times. Your disposition will be on a more-or-less even keel, and you will be inclined to tend to your own affairs more so than people whose basic line of writing varies noticeably.

*came up since I don't
know what to think.
at first I thought* A

Scientists and detail workers write a more or less even basic line. Medical men, newspaper reporters, writers of emotional stories, actors, dramatic orators, high-pressure salesmen and those who sweep you off your feet with their gift of gab rarely write with a straight basic line, and their angle of inclination can be either upright, or forward, or backward, but usually it is about two or three degrees forward with a

touch of the upright now and then.

People whose handwriting looks as if every letter is determined to have a basic line of its own (B) are usually moody. They are smiling and optimistic one day, gloomy and despondent the next. They are impressionable, changeable, and often feel unsure of themselves. But in many cases their moodiness helps them understand other people, and they are not without personal charm.

*is. sure some
country moved
see little I like it
very happy probably
will change your future
I could understand it* B

Sometimes the writing starts on an even line, but takes a downward slant at the end of the line. This shows that the writer started out in high spirits but something or someone has let him down and he has become discouraged and needs cheer-

ing up. People who are cheerful and optimistic, who usually see the bright side of life and make plans for the future, have a tendency to write uphill. In business, these people will need associates who can keep them down to earth, because

their enthusiasm runs off with them.

More about the angle of inclination. The upright handwriting of ordinary pen pressure and rounded letter forms (C and D) shows a good-natured person, but one who

likes to keep to himself, often lives alone and likes it. These people are usually reserved, matter-of-fact individuals. They don't like to be hurried, are generally determined and deliberate in their actions.

do and my own
 thing - I would C
 have for real literary
 I keep on spending D

If these upright writers like anyone, they expect the other fellow to make all the advances. They like to be catered to. And yet they are not really too cold-hearted and utterly without feeling; they desire recognition and friendliness on the part of others and are not happy without them.

The upright writing also shows a

degree of self-consciousness and the fact that the writer rarely gives way to impulse.

Large backhand writing (E) shows a person who is ardent and warm-hearted, but has a hard time finding ways to express himself. Thus, on the surface, he often seems cold, unresponsive, uninterested, and even unfriendly.

Probably and wise
 Perhaps I could E
 reply revealing
 successes on
 indeed. I'll appreciate
 per letter to be analyzed. F

A great many people in various professions and walks of life use the moderate forward slant (F). It reflects a nature that is kind, sympathetic, normally demonstrative in affections and in friendships. These people are always interested in what

is going on around them and in the welfare of their neighbors. In some cases they may not be as efficient as those whose handwriting tends to be more upright, but they are more easygoing, and enjoy life more, as a rule.

*As of handwriting
on, or rather,
character, I am* G

If you observe the handwriting of your friends and people with whom you come in contact, you may find handwriting that looks as if the writer ought to be warm-hearted, but instead of that he appears to be a cold fish. The handwriting may be

small (G), showing some reserve, and although friendly enough to pass the time of day or offer a remark about world conditions, these people are reticent and do not encourage friends or acquaintances to become personal.

*analyze our ha
if possible if the
if there are other
n, that everything is
very much for you* H

When the handwriting leans a good deal to the right (H) we have a temperament that is sentimental, emotional and demonstrative. These people are not happy unless they can show you by their words, deeds and actions that they like you and how much, once they feel on home ground. They are usually ready to do some little thing to express their liking and interest, especially for those of the opposite sex, if the handwriting is of moderately heavy pen pressure.

If the handwriting is of light or moderate pressure it shows idealism and high qualities of character. If muddy-looking, with spasmodic pen pressure, an uncontrolled temperament. The heavier the pen pressure used, the more the writer will be interested in the earthy qualities of affections, friendships and personal comforts and possessions. But always there is a warmth that can't be kept down. These people are also easily offended, perhaps because they feel more intensely than those

Will you be
this week?

Wed or Thurs

This is a
of my handwriting.
See how you can anal I

whose writing is upright—the latter being more sensible and logical.

Most of us know at least one person who somehow gives us the impression of being two or three different characters rolled into one. People of this type are usually charming, intelligent, grasp new ideas quickly, can be proficient in more than one line of work, but they are often the victims of their own temperaments unless they slow down and use logic and common sense when emotionally tangled up.

These traits show in the various slants contained in above handwriting (I). These people are ardent, but somehow appear cold and reserved. They are not demonstrative

unless emotionally aroused, but try to show their liking and appreciation in doing things for others without fuss or ceremony. They are impulsive, and still in the process of learning to control their emotions—even as you and I.

Yet, contrary as it may seem, their emotions seldom rule them, probably because they do have a good amount of logic and common sense which they do hesitate to employ at all times. If the t bars are good and other signs in the writing do not point to weakness, the varied slants in one handwriting show only moodiness and not emotional instability. But if the writing is weak, the personality is likely to be varied and unstable.

THE END.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

"MURDER BY MOONLIGHT"

complete novel by Inez Sabastian,
well-known fiction writer,
in next month's issue.

THE HAIR OF THE DOG

by MURRAY VAN PRAAG

*Was this a careless hit-and-run driver?
Or the careful driver of a murder car?*

"Extry! Extry! Read all about it. Mayor Thomas killed by hit-and-run driver. Commissioner Manning promises investigation and early arrest. Hey, read all about it! Extry! Extry!"

The newsboys from the Keyport *Clarion* were out shouting their wares an hour earlier than usual, this morning. But there was a reason for it, a very good one. Reform Mayor Thomas, who had been elected only a scant two months ago, was now the late mayor of the city. The early-morning silence of the city began to swell to a crescendo of amazement and loud bewilderment. But by evening, all had been forgotten. The president of the city council, Martin Wyatt, had been inducted as the new mayor, and Keyport slept once again. Keyport slept again, but Police Commissioner John Manning pondered long and deeply.

At noon of the next day, there was a visitor who entered the police com-

missioner's private office. He was a young man in his early thirties, tall and husky. Every step he took seemed to exude a power and vigor which was usually denied the average man. As he walked through police headquarters, he was greeted by cries of "Hiya, Jerry," and "Glad to see you back on the job, Dermody." Evidently his was a familiar figure to the cops attached to headquarters.

Dermody sat down across the desk at which Commissioner Manning was seated. His tanned face broke into a smile as he said: "Well, commissioner, I guess you wanted something more important than to have me go duck hunting with you, when you called me at three in the morning to fly down here from Washington. I've got a hunch that our crime wave is spreading out again. Do I hit the bull's-eye?"

"Dermody, this is going to be a bit like duck hunting, but we're going after more important game,

the kind of game that'll try to kill you, if you're not too careful." The commissioner frowned.

"Of course," Manning continued, "you already know what happened last night—the death of Mayor Thomas, who was supposedly run over by a hit-and-run driver. Well, just between you and me, he was murdered in cold blood, murdered by the same vicious group we've been trying to lick. That's why I put through that emergency call for you."

Dermody's eyes saddened momentarily, then his jaw began to assume a pugnacious angle as he spoke:

"Chief, I'm rather glad you called me away from Washington. I've been chafing at the bit because I couldn't pitch in with you on this scrap. Now your statement that Thomas was murdered sort of heaps new coals on the fire. I never met him personally, but from what I've heard he was a square shooter and one real guy. But there isn't much sense in talking. Give me the dope, and I'll see where I can get started."

"I think I'll pull down that large map of the city," said Manning, as he got up and walked over to the wall of his office. "We'll start by showing you the exact spot at which Mayor Thomas was hit by the murder car."

As the two men bent over the map, the lunch whistle from one of the aircraft factories could be heard. Keyport was a city of over a hundred thousand inhabitants which had mushroomed forth overnight, due to the construction of two enormous aircraft plants in its vicinity. With the new population had come the usual visitations upon a rapidly growing and thriving community—vice, racketeers and crooked politicians.

For a period of five years, Key-

port had endured all the filth and scandal with an air of indifference and apathy. Then the better element of the city had demanded a change. Martin Wyatt, president of the Keyport Federal Bank, had organized the first reform party the city ever had, and with Richard Thomas heading the slate, it had swept to victory. The rule of evil in Keyport was apparently on the way out.

As his police commissioner, Thomas had chosen John Manning, a police captain who had been banished to the outskirts of the city for his vehement protestations against the inefficiency and corruptness of the police department. Manning had swept out of the department all the men who had been working with the old elements. His present force, however, was not sufficiently able to cope with the demands of the now-large city. It was still the type of department which would have been sufficiently able when Keyport had a population of twenty thousand people. Manning had immediately chosen Jerry Dermody, the most promising and ambitious detective on his present force, and sent him to the new police school run by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Washington. He was determined to build up an efficient and scientific police force.

Then, two days after Thomas had taken office, he and Commissioner Manning had started their efforts to stamp out the crime and violence in the city. After a few weeks they began to realize that they had undertaken a Herculean job. The situation was one with which they were unable, at the present time, to cope.

Racketeers who were picked up for questioning were released almost immediately with writs of habeas corpus. When there was

any case really built up against any of these men, there was always a bondsman on hand who could supply bail. If the case were hopelessly against the arrested men, they would skip town.

Then it was discovered that witnesses were being intimidated against appearing on the various cases to give their evidence. Thomas and Manning began to realize that crime in Keyport was not a helter-skelter affair, that the lawless element of the city was organized, that there was one man who held the strings in this puppet show of evil. Yet, doggedly and determinedly, they kept on. They knew that if this central figure were located, they could smash the forces surrounding the city.

Phone calls were received by Richard Thomas, in which he was warned to give up the chase. He laughed off these threats and even refused to accept the police guard which Commissioner Manning offered him. In fact, he became highly angered when Manning placed a uniformed policeman in front of his home. Manning finally had to withdraw the cop.

The night of his death, Thomas excitedly called up Manning to inform him that he had just received another threat over the phone, a threat that implied certain death if the battle were not discontinued immediately. Thomas stated that he had recognized the voice and was coming over to Manning's home by car to give him the identity of the caller. The commissioner had attempted to persuade Thomas to remain at home, while he came over with a police detail, but the mayor had hung up before he could convince him that he should wait.

Thomas' home had been built fifty years ago by his father. It was

now located fifteen miles from the center of the city. The beautiful old home was completely surrounded—except for the front, which faced the State highway—by a flower arbor. Thomas had built his garage across the road, as he had refused to sacrifice this gorgeous arbor. As he crossed the road that night to get out his car, he had been run over and crushed by an automobile.

When the commissioner had finished reciting the salient features of the tragedy, the two men sat silently for a moment. Then Dermody asked: "Is there any sort of evidence from which I can at least make a start?"

"Well, there isn't very much," said Commissioner Manning very slowly. "This is about all I can tell you. The hands of his wrist watch had stopped, from the impact of the car, at twelve thirty-five. From the skid of the tires, there was a mark left on the road, evidence which led us to believe that the automobile involved in the killing was a heavy car, probably in the luxury class. But that still leaves us against a blank wall."

"With that sort of lead, I guess I've got my job really cut out for me." Dermody shook his head dejectedly.

"Oh, yes, there's something else we did do," Manning said. "Thomas' head was pretty badly battered in, evidently from coming into contact with the radiator grille in the front of the car. I had twenty men searching the town for traces of blood on the front of any heavy automobile, but I guess the murder car's been cleaned pretty thoroughly by this time."

"Was there anything found at the scene of the murder which I might

be able to use as some form of evidence?" Dermody asked.

"The only thing that we did find," said the commissioner, "was a book of matches which I have in our carbon-copy imitation of a crime-detection laboratory. I fail to see, however, where we can fit it into the picture."

"You never can tell about those little pieces of apparently extraneous items," smiled Dermody. "While I was at the Washington police school, I heard of cases being broken on much less headway than a book of matches. Do me a favor, chief, and trot it out."

The commissioner shook his head doubtfully as he picked up the phone to call the police laboratory.

"It doesn't sound very plausible to me, this attempt to build something out of nothing. But the case really has me stumped. In fact, this whole business is way above my head, so I guess for the next few days I'll have to let you be the king-pin. Laying aside this detail of my being your chief, I'm asking you man to man to do whatever is humanly possible. Thomas was a good friend of mine, and I'll be indebted to you tremendously if you do track down the killer."

When the match book was brought in, Manning took it from the police clerk and handed it to Detective Lieutenant Dermody. The two men sat quietly for a few moments while Dermody studied the matches. Then he spoke once again to Manning.

"Chief, if you were such a friend of the late mayor, would you know if he smoked?"

"Dermody, I knew Mayor Thomas for fifteen years, and in all that time I never saw him light a cigarette, cigar or pipe. Of that, I'm positive. Nope, Thomas did not smoke."

Dermody stood up and prepared

to leave. He was at the door when he turned around and spoke to Manning once again.

"Say, chief, do you know if our old friend Mootzy Tannen is still in town? I think that it might be advisable for me to give him a little work-out."

Tannen had long been suspected as the contact man for the unknown leader of organized crime in the city. From what the police had already picked up, Tannen seemed to have charge of at least half a dozen different little rackets. He ran the truckmen's union, the swankiest night club in town, a large gambling house in Vesey Street, and a retail-store protective association.

"Yes, he's still running loose, worse luck," Commissioner Manning growled. "We shut down the gambling house two weeks ago, but it's running full blast again. It ought to be simple for you to get in there. In all probability, they're pretty sure they have control of the town again, so they wouldn't be afraid of a copper."

"I guess I'll make that my first stop, then," said big Jerry Dermody as he left the commissioner's office.

That evening, Dermody got into the penthouse apartment in which the gambling casino was located. He had very little trouble, as the commissioner had surmised. He was amazed at the type of person he saw in the converted apartment. With so many people, men and women of good name and financial connections gathered under this roof, it was not surprising that crime had flourished so astonishingly in the city of Keyport. These suckers were actually crying to be taken. Here were all the games which were designed to separate the unwary from their possessions—Black Jack, Klondike, banker and broker, roulette, bac-

carat. There was, undoubtedly, a big power behind this scene, someone much cleverer than Mootzy Tannen.

As Dermody was walking toward the roulette table, he was tapped on the shoulder. He turned around. It was Mootzy.

"Hiya, boy. I thought they had you up in Washington with the Federal guys. Guess you were too smart for them, huh? Well, what can we do for you, copper? Maybe a little craps, a little roulette? You know we aim to please our clients." There was a wolfish smile on Tannen's thin, sardonic face.

Dermody was startled at Tannen's knowledge of the fact that he had been sent to Washington by the local police department. According to all accepted versions, it had been understood by everybody that Dermody had merely been given a leave of absence for a few months. Evidently the gang that was running riot through Keyport had some sort of an "in" at city hall or at police headquarters.

"No games for me, rat face," said Dermody pleasantly. "I'm merely looking over the joint. Maybe some day the city'll take over this little money maker of yours, so I merely want to go over the situation. Don't mind, do you?"

"Listen, wise guy," snarled Mootzy, "don't pull that smart-Aleck stuff on me. We got a lot of drag in this burg, and if you act up too clever, you may be taken care of in a way you won't like—see?"

"Like you took care of Mayor Thomas, perhaps?" Dermody spoke in his soft, pleasant voice as he pulled Tannen toward him by the lapel of his jacket. "You little punk, I'm going to take care of you very shortly, and when I do this

town will be harder to take than a site in a prison cell."

He released Tannen suddenly, and Mootzy staggered back. Then Dermody continued on his walk to the roulette table. He looked at a girl who was watching the play at the table, and his eyes widened.

The girl was actually an eye opener. She was tall, about five feet ten, the type of girl whose slender and willowy figure was associated with Broadway shows. Her hair was violently red, and her eyes a deep emerald-green. All this, however, was not what had caused Lieutenant Dermody to stop so suddenly.

The girl was Lydia Crannen, he was almost positive. Lydia had been the daughter of fat, genial Michael Crannen, who ran the big drugstore in Lyndon Street when Dermody was still going to high school. At that time Lydia had been only a kid, in Dermody's estimation, as she was five years younger than he. She had developed a crush on him in those days, a crush which he had brushed aside as the fancy of a child. Then he remembered something about her having a scrap with her father, an incident which had resulted in her leaving Keyport and running away to New York. There had been some sort of rumor about Lydia working in show business in New York, but nobody had seen her since the day she had left the town.

Dermody walked around the table and stood at it so that he was directly opposite her. He was not absolutely sure that this girl was Lydia, so he wanted to see if she would show any sign of recognition when she saw him. When the tall beauty's eyes finally rested on Dermody's face, she nodded slightly and then walked over to a corner of

the room. Dermody followed her. "Great to see you again, Jerry," the girl muttered. "I can't talk to you here, too many of the boys around. Give me your address, and I'll come over later. Maybe you can help me."

As soon as Dermody had given her the address of the hotel at which he lived, Lydia hurried swiftly back to the roulette table. Dermody scratched his head at this display of mystery, but finally decided that the girl might have a very good reason for not speaking to him at the gambling house. There might be a possibility that her attitude had a bearing on the case which he was trying to crack.

When Dermody went back to his hotel, he waited for the girl until well after one o'clock in the morning. He had just decided to give it up as a lost cause, when the phone rang and the desk clerk informed him that there was a young lady, who would not give her name, who wished to see him. Dermody asked the clerk to send her up.

When Lydia entered the room, she seemed to have lost the hardness which had been in her face while she was at Tannen's penthouse. Now she looked like a young, bewildered schoolgirl.

As soon as Dermody had taken her wrap, she said: "Jerry, thank God we finally got together! Jerry, you've got to help me. I understand that you're now a lieutenant on the city force, so when you hear my story I feel sure that you'll want to get in on this."

Lydia's story, as she related it to Dermody, started at the time she had run away from home at the age of eighteen. The reason for her leaving was rather shocking. She had discovered, going through the prescriptions, that her father had

been selling morphine to addicts. She had thrown the accusation in her father's face. He had not denied it, had promised immediately to discontinue the illicit practice, but Lydia, horrified as only a young girl of eighteen can be, had left home, vowing never to come back. Her world had been shattered.

After a few years spent in New York, during which time she had been working in various musical comedies, her attitude had changed, and she had renewed her acquaintance with her father, this time to discover that his lapse was being paid for many times over. Tannen had discovered that the old man had once engaged in the sale of drugs, and he was extorting money from him under the threat of revealing his knowledge to the Federal authorities. Michael Crannen had appealed to his daughter for aid, but there was absolutely nothing that she could do to get him out of this mess. Finally, the old man had, out of desperation, committed suicide.

When Lydia received the news she felt that, morally, this was a case of murder—a murder which had been committed by Mootzy and whoever gave him his orders. In a mad desire for revenge, Lydia had come back to Keyport under the name of Glenda Frenzo. She had finally contrived to meet Mootzy and he had given her a job as a singer in the Club Frenzia, which he was running. Lydia had cunningly played her hand, and at the present time Mootzy was madly in love with her. She had, however, not secured any real evidence against Tannen, as yet, and he was pressing her. There was not very much time left. She realized that she could not hold the little gangster off much longer.

"Then I saw you at Mootzy's



Dermody lashed out with both feet and caught Tannen in the pit of the stomach.

headquarters, Jerry," Lydia went on, "and I felt there might be some help. I heard from somebody that you're on the police force here, and I knew that if anybody could help it would be you. What do you say?" Lydia's face betrayed deep anxiety.

"Lydia, I'm taking a long chance, but I think I can trust you," Dermody said. "It so happens that I've been assigned to track down the man who murdered Mayor Thomas, something which is tied up with all the filth in this town. It looks as if you and I are sort of tied up together now. But before we get

started, let me give you a little warning about something. I'm not very much interested in Tannen. I'm out to get the guy he takes orders from. So if you're just interested in getting back at Tannen, maybe we'd better skip the whole thing."

"Oh, Jerry," the girl cried, "it's not just Tannen. If there is somebody else, I want to get at him and at the same time do my little bit for what's right and decent."

"Shake, partner," Dermody said. He put out his hand. "Now let's get down to business. What do you know that might help me tie down

some facts? Have you any idea as to who gives Tannen his orders?"

"Well, Jerry, that's kind of hard to say," Lydia answered. "I recall that only yesterday he said the city administration was so tied up that it was eating out of his hands, and that he had as much power in Keyport as the mayor. When I pressed him to amplify his remarks, he growled at me and then shut up like a clam. I know that time is short in my case, because he's getting suspicious of me. If he ever makes any inquiries and finds out who my father was, I'll be in mighty bad!"

"Isn't there anything else you can tell me that might be important?" Dermody asked. "Have you ever seen him talk to anybody, heard him over the telephone, seen any of his private records? Think hard, because even something that might be absolutely trivial, in your opinion, might give me the lead to Mr. Big Shot."

"Oh, Jerry, I guess I've made a mess of my try at revenge," Lydia cried. "I really haven't been able to worm anything out of Mootzy, although I tried hard to do so. I suppose I really can't be any use at all to you on this case. Maybe I ought to leave Keyport again before— Wait! I think I remember something that Mootzy said after a telephone call one night. He came out of his office smiling and rubbing his hands and said: 'I never thought much of left-handed guys until the big boss entered my love life, but now I guess I'll have to hand them a few laurels. For a lefty, that guy's a genius.' Those were almost his exact words, and that's as far as I can help you, Jerry."

"Baby!" Dermody yelled exultantly. "You've sent the old locomotive a mile down the track. There's the kind of start I needed.

In the few choice words you've used, I've found the answer to my maiden's prayer—a start at last!"

The detective and the girl were interrupted just then by a knock on the door. Dermody asked who was there.

"Room service," answered the voice from outside the door.

Dermody had not requested anything over the phone, but he shrugged his shoulders and opened the door. Instantly, he was knocked off his feet, and from his position on the floor, he heard the door slam. He looked up. The intruder was Mootzy Tannen with a .38 in his hand and a wild look in his eyes. Dermody lay quietly. He knew that Tannen would shoot immediately if he made a move. Tannen spoke, ignoring Dermody, and addressing himself to Lydia.

"I mighta guessed you were a stool pigeon, you damned little punk! So you thought Mootzy was soft in the head and wouldn't keep an eye on you, huh? Well, baby, you're goin' ridin', and you know the kind o' ride it's gonna be. I got lots o' drag, so even though the copper here is in on the kill, I got myself all set for alibis and whatever's needed. So get goin', baby. Get goin'!"

The girl cowered, but she started moving toward the door. Dermody saw Tannen move toward him, all set to apply a quick knockout with the butt of his gun. There was not much time to act.

Then Dermody saw his out. Tannen was standing on a carpet runner leading from the door of the room to the couch. Dermody yanked it quickly, and as Tannen stumbled toward him, temporarily off balance, he lashed out from the floor with both feet and caught Tannen in the pit of the stomach. As Mootzy went

down groaning, Dermody took command of the situation. Within the next five seconds, Tannen was securely handcuffed to the door. Dermody then tried to get the commissioner on the phone at his home. A sleepy and grumpy housekeeper informed the detective that Commissioner Manning had left that evening for a three-day police commissioners' convention in Chicago.

Dermody looked at Lydia grimly. Then he spoke.

"Kid, you've got to lay low for the next few days. You've got some friends in town who ought to be able to hide you out. Some of this rat's boy friends may know where he was heading for, and when he doesn't get back they might start gunning for you. Get in hiding, and when you do, leave a message for me at headquarters as to where you are. As for me, I've got my work cut out for quite a while."

After Dermody had called headquarters for a squad car, he said good-by to Lydia and advised her to be very careful until he had given her the all-clear signal. Then he unceremoniously dragged his sullen

prisoner to the hotel elevator and from there to the street entrance. The car he had ordered over the phone pulled up to the curb with a wild squeal of brakes, as soon as he got out into the street.

"Joe," he shouted to the driver as he threw his man into the back of the car, "drive me over to Mayor Wyatt's home. I've got a little request to make."

Five minutes later the car stopped before the sedate, middle-class home of the new mayor, Martin Wyatt. Wyatt had been engaged in the real-estate business in Keyport for the past ten years, and had been one of the organizers of the reform ticket which had elected the late mayor. He had also obtained victory as president of the city council and was now automatically elevated to the office of mayor.

After a wait of a few minutes, the mayor himself sleepily opened the door, and in a shocked voice asked Dermody what he wanted at that time in the morning. When Dermody explained that his visit was extremely important, Wyatt asked him into the living room.

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Dermody explained the events leading up to his arrival at the mayor's home, and when he was finished Wyatt looked at him rather blankly.

"Lieutenant, I'm very much pleased with your attempt to bring this city back to normalcy, but that still does not explain your desire to see me at this hour of the morning. Where do I come into the picture?"

"Well, mayor," answered Dermody, "I tried to get the commissioner, but he's out of town for a couple of days and what I want must be done in a hurry. I'd like to get a written authorization from you, allowing me to hold Tannen without any sort of court action for the next two days. In this way, his shyster lawyers won't be able to spring him while I'm out trying to crack this case."

"Isn't that a rather high-handed and illegal way to handle this affair?" the mayor asked.

"It certainly is, but we're up against something that always seems to take advantage of the loopholes in the law, and I want this time to close those loopholes for a few days."

Wyatt assumed a pompous position, in an attempt to keep up with the dignity of his office. He cogitated for a while and then opened his desk drawer to pull out a sheet of paper.

Wyatt handed Dermody the letter of authorization with the air of an emperor distributing largess. Dermody knew that the present mayor was one of the most civic-minded and able citizens in Keyport, but from this first meeting, he could not help but dislike the rather pompous and dictatorial attitude displayed by Wyatt. The man had a job which in all probability he was not suited to fill. That was an-

other score which could be tabbed against the illicit organization of the city.

An hour later, Tannen was securely entrenched away in the bowels of the city prison, where no lawyer would ever be able to see him. Dermody then went into the head keeper's office to get a few hours of sleep before he started off on the trail again. There was not sufficient time to go back to the hotel room, as dawn was already breaking.

Dermody left orders to be awakened at eight o'clock, as he had two very important stops to make—stops which in all probability might serve to clinch his ideas on the solution of Mayor Thomas' murder.

There was a squad car awaiting him when he stepped out of the gates of the city jail. He directed the cop driving the car to take him to the Trailene Restaurant, which was situated directly across the street from the city hall. It was an eating spot patronized exclusively by the higher paid civil service employees and the politicians of the city. In this restaurant was usually thrashed out every big deal involving the city administration. The Keyport news reporters called it the "Twelve O'Clock City Hall."

At the restaurant, Dermody spoke briefly to the manager, Al Rossiter, and then proceeded to spend a busy half-hour questioning the waitresses and bus boys as they appeared from the kitchen. Suddenly his face broke out into a broad smile. He had discovered that what he had considered as a hypothesis was now on the verge of being actually confirmed.

The next stop on the schedule was to be the campus of Lawrence College. Dermody sat back in the car,

and while they quickly ate up the distance of twenty-five miles cogitated on how little, apparently unimportant bits of evidence and conversations will gradually mount up until a scientific knockout blow can once again be given against crime.

When he arrived at the campus, he asked for and was directed to the office of Professor Albert Johns, head of the department of biology at the college. He remained in earnest conversation with Johns for an hour, and then the two men came out of the office and entered the police car. Johns was carrying a microscope.

Commissioner Manning gloomily walked up the steps of police headquarters. He had just returned from the police commissioners' convention, a meeting for which he had absolutely no enthusiasm, as his thoughts were constantly occupied by the murder of Mayor Thomas. He had the fullest confidence in Jerry Dermody, but he felt that the young detective would be unable to cope with the powerful group which was running law and order into the ground in Keyport.

He entered his office with his head down on his chest and was startled out of his reverie by a "Hello, commissioner." He looked up to see Lieutenant Dermody seated in his office. Manning passed his hand wearily through his hair and said, "Well, have you any developments for me, Dermody?"

"I've got more than developments, chief," Dermody answered. "I've got our man. Before I get started, however, I wish you'd call Mayor Wyatt and have him come over. I think that he ought to be in on this as he gave me some aid only the other evening."

The commissioner excitedly called

the mayor's office. While they waited for the arrival of the mayor, Dermody went outside to find out if Lydia Crannen had as yet phoned in her whereabouts. His face creased up into happy grins when he received his expected message from the telephone operator. The address would be his next assignment.

The mayor arrived at police headquarters with his usual pompous air completely erased.

The three men gathered around the commissioner's desk and Dermody commenced immediately to present his case. As he spoke, he slouched rather lazily in his chair, but there was a certain attitude which showed that he could move with the speed of a tiger when aroused.

"When I first started on the Thomas case," he said, "Commissioner Manning showed me a pack of matches which had been found at the scene of the killing. As Mayor Thomas never smoked, I assumed that these matches had dropped out of the murder car. As I looked at them, it suddenly struck me that the matches had all been pulled from the left side of the package. Something like this is only done by a man who is left-handed. I had a fairly good start on my case. I decided that I was going to look for a left-handed murderer."

"But," interrupted Manning, "isn't it entirely possible that those matches might have been dropped on the road by someone who wasn't even remotely connected with the case?"

"Yes, I took that into consideration," Dermody said, "but I decided to work out the hypothesis to its logical conclusion. I then phoned the match company and got a list of its distributing agencies in this

section of the country. There was an ad for Bayro Cigars on the match folder, and I ascertained from the nearest distributing agency that these matches were available at the Trailene Restaurant and two other spots in town. I made my first bee-line for the restaurant, and there I hit pay dirt. I questioned some of the waitresses and discovered from one of them that a very prominent individual in this town was a regular diner and that he smoked and was left-handed. I had definitely tied in my only clue."

The mayor looked up at Dermody angrily. "This is absolute rot," he declared. "Why, she must have meant me. I'm left-handed, and I smoke heavily. But, man, you can't possibly try to accuse me of this. Why, Mayor Thomas was one of my best friends. I had even used him as my attorney in business."

"I haven't made any accusations toward anybody, as yet," Dermody laughed. "Please let me continue with my account of the investigation."

"Yes, yes, go ahead, we're listening," the commissioner said excitedly.

"The tie-up between the matches and the actual head of crime in this city came when a certain young lady informed me that she had overheard Mootzy Tannen boast about his chief being left-handed. I knew I was on the right trail. My next stop was at Lawrence College, where I commanded the services of Professor Albert Johns and his microscope. From the college we proceeded to the garage where my suspect had his car. There was evidently a good cleaning job done on the automobile after its murder mission had been accomplished, but there were a few very important hairs on the hood.

"Here I applied some of the scientific training which had been picked up in Washington. There are tiny, elongated sacs in hair, called fusi. They vary as much as fingerprints. Normally, the sacs are filled with a clear fluid. Under rough treatment, like a blow, some of the sacs break. They then fill with air. Well, our examination of the hairs under the microscope gave us these facts. All that remained was to see if these hairs corresponded with those on the head of the late mayor. The coroner gave us his aid on this, and the case was completely tied in.

"Mayor Wyatt, I accuse you of the murder of Mayor Thomas, and I am asking the commissioner to hold you on my charges of murder!"

Wyatt, his face pale, his eyes suddenly lit up with a maniacal gleam, sprang up from his seat, but Dermody was too quick for him. Before Wyatt could take one step away from the chair, Dermody's fist had shot like lightning at the point of his chin. Wyatt was out cold.

"My boy," said the commissioner, "you've saved my job and what's more, you've dealt a death blow to crime in the city of Keyport. Of course, I could say that it was only in the normal line of your duty, but I'm in your debt for a long time."

Dermody laughed. "Well, commissioner," he said, "you might start part payment right now, by giving me the balance of the day off from duty. I've got another assignment to take care of immediately—a red-headed crime wave, and there isn't much time to waste, because there'll be many others on its trail before long."

THE END.

DEATH IS A FACT

by **LESLIE M. WILLIAM**

*And that's why McGovern, homicide chief,
told his new sleuth not to get fancy.*

Danny Stevens had been on the force two years when he got his break. Promoted to plain clothes, he was assigned to the midtown squad.

That was a compliment to Danny. It also put him on the spot. The midtown squad was good. It was composed of the department's ace man hunters. Each possessed a zealously honed reputation. It was natural, therefore, that none of them had very high regard for a kid copper just out of harness.

Lieutenant Rack McGovern, who headed the squad, wasted little time on Danny. McGovern, tall, suave, immaculate, was a mental ferret.

"Don't get fancy, kid," he drawled. "Just stick to facts. There's a lot to this laboratory and Sherlock Holmes stuff. But the smart cop sticks to facts. Think you can remember that?"

Danny nodded, awed. His oracle had spoken.

A week passed. Then a bombshell burst. Harve Mango was found murdered in his own apartment. Five hundred thousand dollars had been taken from his safe.

That was the motive, and a good one. The death gun was found by McGovern. The gun showed a clear

set of fingerprints. That's where the bombshell came in. The fingerprints belonged to Con Walters. And Walters had been dead ten years.

Twelve years before, Harve Mango and Con Walters had been partners in the rackets. Mango had double-crossed Walters. Consequently, Walters went to prison for twenty years.

But he served only six months. A new cell block was under construction, and someone got careless with a truckload of dynamite. When the dust and debris settled, Con Walters had served his term. They dug out his mangled body, along with those of several other convicts, identified it carefully, and put it back in the ground.

So, finish, Mr. Con Walters. But now, fantastically, after ten years he had somehow reached a ghostly hand from beyond the pale to murder his ex-partner.

"There's got to be," Lieutenant Rack McGovern told his midtown squad sagely, "some sort of explanation."

The squad waited, breathless and eager, for the answer. But McGovern didn't have it. Neither did anyone else. The squad wouldn't

admit it, of course, but they were stuck. The thing was insane, impossible. No two sets of prints in all the world were the same. Still, dead men simply did not go around leaving occult fingerprints on murder weapons.

No one asked young Danny Stevens what he thought. In their baffled state, McGovern and the others had forgotten he was on the squad. As the days mounted without a solution being reached, Danny began to wish he wasn't.

The known facts of the case were simple. Pritchard, the elevator man on duty the night Mango died, had taken two men to Mango's floor shortly before the murder. He identified both of them. One was Monk Harris. The other was Billy the Bat. Both had known homicidal tendencies, and weren't above stealing a dime, much less five hundred thousand dollars. Both swore Mango was alive when they left him. Their word on a mountain of Bibles meant nothing. But, their fingerprints did. Their prints were not on the murder gun. The dead Con Walters' were.

No one else had been known to enter the apartment. But the morning after the murder, Pritchard sought out Rack McGovern.

"I'll do anything I can to help," he said. Tears glinted in his eyes. He wiped at them swiftly with a white-gloved hand. "Mr. Mango had a heart. He was aces. He didn't think he was better than a guy that didn't have no dough."

It was obvious the man was deeply stirred. He was a strangely intense, yet seemingly lonely fellow, with tired eyes set in a tight-drawn face.

"Take it easy," McGovern calmed him. "It was rat eat rat, so far as I'm concerned. But we'll get the ghost who got him."

That's where McGovern was wrong. A week after the case had broken, they didn't know a thing they hadn't known when they'd first seen the body.

Pritchard came to headquarters twice, at McGovern's request. Each time his performance was the same. He sat in the squad-room chair of honor, his topcoat gaping, his gloved hands clasped in his peculiar intense way, trying vainly to supply the midtown squad with a clue that would aid in the solution of Harve Mango's murder.

But there was nothing he could tell. McGovern finally dismissed him. The great man swung to Danny. Danny Stevens' heart rose high. At last they were going to consult him.

"I think," McGovern observed, "I'd like a container of coffee. Run across the street and get it, will you, kid?"

Danny glumly did. Which he shouldn't have. It set a precedent. At once he became official coffee getter for the whole squad. Danny realized he had to do something. If he was a detective, it was obvious he was going to have to prove it.

A tedious twenty-four hours passed. McGovern was no longer suave and bland. He was irritable and disgusted.

"We've exhausted," he told his squad, "the resources of one of the finest police laboratories in the world. And we're still right where we started. But we've got to break this case, or the whole science of detection through fingerprints is shattered. The impossible can't be. This thing's a trick, a gag of some kind." His face screwed up, displeased. "Well, who's got any ideas?"

No one noticed Danny, who stood

in the doorway. Danny said meekly: "Should I bring him in now, sir?"

McGovern turned. "Bring who in?" he snapped.

"The murderer," said Danny.

Two patrolmen thrust a protesting man into the room. McGovern stared.

"My God!" he groaned. "We'll have suits for false arrest!"

The protesting man was Pritchard, the elevator operator.

Danny evidently mistook McGovern's stare for speechless happiness.

"This here," he boasted, "is none other than Con Walters. He never died ten years ago. Don't ask me how, but some other prisoner's body was identified as his. He got away, and had his face rebuilt. He came back to town, finally, and got a job in Mango's building. He could have knocked Mango over any time, but he waited till he could grab that five hundred grand."

Pritchard turned to McGovern, uneasy, bewildered.

"I don't understand none of this, sir," he said. "Mr. Mango was my friend."

"He left the murder gun there on purpose," Danny said. "He knew with the fingerprints of a dead man on it, we wouldn't ever suspect a live elevator operator."

Pritchard's tired eyes sought McGovern's. There was apprehension and dumb appeal in them. He said:

"If this is a joke of some kind, O. K.—I guess it's funny. But I don't think it's fair to kick a guy around, just because he's nobody."

Danny proceeded blithely.

"From the beginning," he announced, "I was suspicious of this guy. His face is too young for the rest of him. And if you remember, sir, he always wore his gloves. So,

it came to me all in a flash, that—"

McGovern's face was the color of a firecracker.

"All in a flash you're off this squad, and back in harness!" he bel-lowed. "By six o'clock tonight! Turn this poor guy loose, shut up, and get out of here!"

"It came to me all in a flash," said Danny stanchly, "that all I had to do was get his fingerprints. I followed him to where he ate his supper last night, and snitched the cup he drunk his coffee out of. He had to take his mitts off to eat. And the prints he left on that cup belong to Con Walters. The lab downstairs just told me so."

Pritchard screamed. One of the patrolmen grabbed him around the neck. The other pinned him against the wall.

"You louse!" he panted. "You stinking young louse! I wait ten years to get square, and you get ideas about not eating with gloves on!"

McGovern scowled at Danny.

"O. K.—so you break the case. But what put this into your noggin?"

Danny looked surprised.

"Why, you, sir," he said.

"Me?" demanded McGovern. "I didn't say anything about not eating with gloves on."

"No, sir," Danny assured him. "But if a guy's been dead ten years, then he can't murder no one. And you told me I should always stick to facts. And death is—well, I guess you might call it a fact, sir."

The ace sleuth of the ace squad didn't bat an eye. He dropped the morning paper over the pile of data on scientific detection that had accumulated on his desk.

"Yes," he agreed. "Yes, I guess you might, at that."

THE END.

CONNOISSEUR OF MURDER

by JOSEPH C. STACEY

*Nicky Borden kept discovering bodies,
and finally he discovered the truth.*



Blane, the city editor, had me cornered. How he managed to trap me, I'll never know. I was lying at his feet, tied hand and foot, looking up into his red, ugly face. He looked funny as hell with a pair of horns sticking out from each side of his head. He held a pitchfork in one hand, and his tail in the other. He raised the pitchfork high, let out a screech of utter delight, and jabbed me aft of my stomach once—twice—three times. I yelled with each jab, opened my eyes, and looked up into an angel's gorgeous face.

"So this is heaven," I grunted hoarsely. "Is nice, but I didn't want to die yet."

The angel bopped me on the head, and lashed out with acid-drenched words: "Yet is about twenty-seven years too late. A drunken stumble-bum like you never should have been born."

I closed my eyes; opened them again. She had no halo over her black hair now. But she still was an angel for my money. Her name was Mary Trent. She was the so-

ciety editor for the rag that I used to work for. Her lovely face was flushed, and her big, blue eyes were raging.

"Come on, come on, my handsome-faced goon!" she stormed, bopping me again. "Get out of my bed before I'm forced to commit unholy blitzkrieg on you."

I looked around. She was right. I was in her bed. I slid off to the floor. I fixed my tie, buttoned my vest, and slipped into my coat.

She lit herself a cigarette. "Of all the dirty stunts to pull," she blazed, "this is the dirtiest of all!"

I smiled. "Don't fret, puss. I'll preserve your good name for you. I'll hop downtown, get a license, and make you my wife quicker'n you can spell *amour*."

I ducked into the living room. She followed, lipping denunciations and such, and ending up with something about rather dying an old maid than becoming my wife.

I pulled out some bottles from the taboret, and mixed a pair of drinks. "Have one, Miss Stormy Weather?"

She sank onto the chintz-covered davenport. "You drink them," she said. "And I hope you choke on 'em."

"Now, is that a nice thing to say, gorgeous?" I asked, downing the drinks.

"I hate you, Nicky," she said.

I sat down upon the davenport beside her. "And I hate you, too," I told her. "Now, aren't we the perfect hating couple, though?"

She was silent, but she was smiling, so everything was all right. "The police are combing Los Angeles for you, Nicky," she said.

"Don't I know it!" I groaned. "I've been dodging them all day. That's why I ducked into your apartment. It looked like the safest bet to me. Hope you don't mind as much as

you're trying to make believe that you do?"

She shook her head, and made her black hair dance.

"How is Mr. Louse Blane, anyway?" I asked.

"He's sporting a beautiful black eye," she said. "He's carrying a gun to kill you with on sight, and he has sworn out a warrant charging you with attempted murder."

"Woe is me," I said.

"Why did you try to kill him, Nicky? Were you drunk, as usual, at the time?"

"Now, wait a minute, Mary," I protested. "Let's not start making mountains out of molehills. All I did was to clout Blane in the kisser once or twice."

"And your reasons?" she asked.

"I wanted a vacation. He said 'no.' I told him what I thought of him. He told me what he thought of me. An argument ensued. Fists



flew, and mayhem followed. That's all there's to it."

She knocked my hand from her knee. "And where are you planning to spend your permanent vacation, my terrible Ivan?"

"In a wooden box, under six feet of dirt, most likely. The gambling boys of L. A. are laying odds that I'll be a stiff before the week is over."

Mary laughed. "Blane won't kill you. He's too smart to do away with a worm like you."

"Maybe Blane won't," I said. "But Harvey Gates will."

Her face blanched suddenly. "Harvey Gates! I . . . I thought he was in jail!"

"You certainly don't read your papers, Mary. If you did, you'd know that Harvey Gates escaped from San Quentin yesterday. He killed two guards breaking out. He's out to kill, Mary—out to kill me and Blane as he promised to do five years ago."

The phone rang then. Mary stood up and answered it. She said: "Yes? . . . Yes, this is Mary Trent." Then she listened for several seconds, caught her breath. Her eyes were wide. "Who is this?" she asked in a voice that trembled slightly. "Hello . . . hello—" She hung up, and turned on me. "Oh, Nicky!" she cried.

I had her in my arms. "What's the matter, Mary?"

"T-the man who just phoned. He said that . . . that there was a c-corpse in the apartment directly above mine! Oh, Nicky!"

I was forced to take a deep breath. "Corpse!" I exclaimed chokingly. "Corpse? Apartment above? Hell, Mary, some wisenheimer must be ribbing you." I added: "Who lives in the apartment above, anyway?"

"A Miss Burgess, Nicky. A Miss Helen Burgess."

"It don't make sense," I groaned. "Hell, why in the holy name of Buddha should anybody call you?"

"But, if it's on the level," I mused out loud, "what a story it would make!" I yanked her toward the door. "Come on, Mary, let's get upstairs and take a gander."

We ran up the flight of stairs; found the apartment. The number was 309. I listened at the door; silence greeted my ears. I pressed the buzzer, heard it shrill inside the apartment, waited. Nobody answered. I tried the doorknob. It turned, and the door opened. The place was as dark as the European conflict. I switched on the lights, and went in.

The living room was empty—of human beings. The furniture looked undisturbed. There was peace and silence in the room. An uneasy silence, a silence that sent cold chills up and down my spine.

Mary felt it also. "Oh, Nicky!" she whispered in a shivery voice.

"Easy does it, kid," I said, going toward the bedroom door. I opened the door, switched on the lights, and stared.

She lay on the bed.

"What is it?" Mary inquired, taking a look over my shoulder. She gave a short, soft cry, and turned very pale. She looked as if she were going to scream. I clamped my hand over her lips. "Quiet," I warned.

She was trembling; nodded her head. I removed my hand from her lips. "Oh, my God!" she breathed.

I shoved Mary into the living room, and entered the death room.

She lay upon her back, crosswise on the bed. Her blond hair was in disarray; her eyes were wide open,

tongue protruding, her lips bruised. There was horror written deep in her eyes; terror set firmly in the lines of her face. Her throat was bruised, and scratched lividly, indicating the fact that she had been brutally strangled to death.

She was clad in a pink chiffon nightgown, the skirt of which was up to her knees, exposing white, nicely shaped legs. The top of the nightgown was ripped apart, exposing her naked shoulders, and showing red, brutal scratches.

I recognized her. She was a hat-check girl in the Club Paradise. And she had been in the company of Barney Grant several times when I saw her. Barney did the "Tattler" column for the *Globe*.

Then I noticed it for the first time. It lay on the floor near the bed. A red carnation, with the petals crushed and scattered.

I looked at the dead girl's hands. Clutched in the fingers of her right hand were shreds of a carnation petal.

I went back into the living room, lost in thought.

"Is . . . is she d-dead, Nicky?" Mary stammered, her fingers tearing a tiny handkerchief to shreds.

I nodded, picked up the phone, and dialed the *Globe's* number; told Rosie, the switchboard operator, to connect me with Blane.

"Hello," the voice on the other end said.

"Blane, this is Nicky Borden—"

"Borden!" he screeched, exploded, and let loose a string of profanity that would have made Cleopatra blush.

"Shut up, you loud-mouthed baboon," I snapped, "and listen. I'm plumb smack in the middle of a murder scoop—"

"I don't give a damn where you are," he yelled. "If I ever lay my

hands on you—" He stopped very abruptly, and demanded: "What did you say, Nicky boy?"

"I'm in the midst of a murder scoop. Even now, as I stand here phone in hand, my eyes are riveted on the body, on the murder room—" I stopped with deliberate abruptness, sniffed my nose twice noiselessly, and ventured forth with: "But what I want to know first, my dear Simon Legree, is, do I, or don't I get my job back?"

"You've got it back."

"With a raise?" I added.

"Yes! Yes, damn you!" His roar surpassed, in volume, the roar of a thousand diving Stuka bombers.

I gave him the sordid details; when I finished, he yelled: "Are the cops there yet?"

"No. I'm going to call them now."

"Don't!" he screamed. "Hold off until I get there with Tommy. We can get some very exclusive photos!"

Blane and Tommy Wright arrived in ten minutes flat. Blane rubbed his hands together and smiled with pleasure. "Where, Nicky?" he asked with sugar-coated words. He was a small, but a powerfully built man, with hard gray eyes, a deep harsh voice, and minus most of his dark-brown hair. And at this time, he was wearing a pair of dark glasses to hide the blinker that my fist was responsible for.

I nodded toward the bedroom, and he and Tommy went into action.

I headed for the door. Blane's voice stopped me. "Where the hell are you going, Borden?"

"A lead," I said, making my exit as the first flashbulb exploded.

I entered Mary Trent's room to get my hat and coat. Mary was staring out the window into the dark, wet night. She turned around. She looked sick.

I patted her cheek tenderly. "Don't let it throw you, kid," I said softly.

She brushed the back of her hand across her forehead. "I'm all right, now, Nicky," she stated. "But for a moment . . . up there— Oh, Nicky, it was horrible!"

"Murder always is," I told her, slipping into my coat, and donning my hat. "And always will be."

II.

The flashing red-and-blue neon sign proclaimed:

HOTEL AMBASSODORE

I paid off the cabby, and pushed myself through the revolving doors into the lobby. I was thinking: Red carnations go with Barney Grant as a periscope goes with U boats! Barney was never without a carnation; wore one morning, noon and night in the lapel of his coat!

Barney Grant's apartment number was 503. I punched the buzzer, and used my knuckles on the door. Nobody answered. I tried the door. It was unlocked. I pushed it open and went in. I groped for the light switch, found it, and flooded the apartment with lights.

Barney Grant was sitting slouched down in a high-backed easy-chair. His eyes were wide open, and were watching me. But he did not see me. He was dead. The bullet hole in the right side of his temple was ample proof of that.

There wasn't much blood; just a small trickle that had flowed down his cheek, across his chin, and had dripped in small drops onto the coat of his light-blue suit. The blood had dried hours ago.

The fingers of his right hand were almost touching the gun that lay upon the floor near the chair. It was

a small gun; a .32-caliber automatic, with a mother-of-pearl handle.

I examined the temple wound. It was encircled by grains of powder, the hair around it was singed, and the skin was burned to a brownish color. It was evidence enough that the gun had been pressed against his temple when fired.

I touched the body. It was stiff with rigor mortis.

Then I saw the note in the typewriter.

It was very brief. It said, in typical Grant fashion:

To the police:

I strangled Helen Burgess. I'm a louse, and don't deserve to keep on living, so I'm taking my own life.

Give my regards to all the boys and girls.

Barney Grant.

Hours and hours later, after the homicide technicians had taken leave, after the "morgue boys" carted away the body, and after Blane scrambled to peddle his papers, me, Sergeant Irving Pfefferbilt and his man Godfrey, Andy Zachowski, sat in Barney's apartment guzzling his booze.

Pfefferbilt said: "An open-and-shut case, Nicky. Not a thing to it. It's like Barney says in that there note, that he strangled the Burgess kid, and then committed suicide."

Pfefferbilt was a small, rotund man. He possessed a cherub-looking puss, and a pair of china-blue eyes. He had black hair, which he parted in the middle, and which was always combed neatly.

He smoked evil-looking, foul-smelling, black stogies, and was a smiling, happy-looking soul.

"But it doesn't make sense," I argued with him. "Why should Barney kill Burgess? What's his motive? Hell, it isn't at all like him. I

knew Barney. Even though he was a skunk, he wasn't a fool. He'd never have blown his brains out. He thought too much of himself."

"But, nevertheless," Pfefferbilt growled, "he did. This is murder and suicide. Everything points to it. The M. E. says that the dame died between the hours of 12:00 and 1:00 a. m. And that Barney sent himself into hell between 12:30 and 1:30 a. m. His prints, and only his prints, are on the typewriter keys and on the gun. The nitrate test says that he did fire the said gun. Then there's the carnation the babe tore off his lapel. And finally, to cinch matters, there's the confession.

"Yep, Nicky, an open-and-shut case. Barney Grant murdered Helen Burgess, for a reason or for reasons unknown as yet, and then took his own life." He puffed at his stogie, then added grimly: "I'll bet that a damn lot of folks are going to breathe easier now that he's dead. He certainly spread a lot of dirt in his column."

I agreed with Pfefferbilt that the facts pointed to murder and suicide beyond the slightest doubt. But, nevertheless, something persisted in disturbing me. I couldn't place my finger on it. Something in this set-up stunk. Something stunk bad. I could smell it, but, try as I might, I could not trace that foul aroma to its source.

Pfefferbilt rose slowly, and stretched himself lazily. He said to Zachowski: "Juggle up a few more drinks, Zach. Might as well finish the bottle. Hell, Barney ain't gonna have no more use for it."

Zachowski was a tall, heavily built man, with feet like violin cases, and hands the size of catchers' mitts. He was Pfefferbilt's partner, "yes-man" and "man-protector."

Zachowski was a quiet sort of a soul. He seldom spoke when not spoken to. The reason for his being tongue-tied was because of his voice. It was a high falsetto, and made you stare in wonderment whenever he talked. It was unbelievable.

We had the drinks, then Pfefferbilt yawned, and said: "C'mon, I'll give you a lift to your dump, Nicky, m'boy. Ho-hum, I'm tired."

Two weeks later the deeds of Barney Grant were just about forgotten. The case was closed. Even the *Globe* and *Blane* forgot it. It was yesterday's news and it went the way yesterday's football heroes go. Into the past.

Perhaps the most sensational thing that happened in the Burgess-Grant affair occurred when a young trumpet player, Cary Sandstorm, a member of the Dick White's "Troubadours," playing an engagement in the Club Paradise, yanked out a knife one night, and went berserk. He proceeded to hack away with the knife, a huge butcher knife, at Barney Grant's body, and face, as he lay in his casket in the Moran Funeral Home. And when Moran tried to stop the desecration of the dead, he was in turn attacked by Sandstorm. But David Aparo, Moran's assistant, disarmed him before any great harm was done.

Young Cary Sandstorm was in the psychopathic ward now. The doctors revealed that he was suffering from temporary insanity, due to a great mental shock. It was learned that Sandstorm had been very much in love with Helen Burgess.

I was sitting on the desk in Mary Trent's office, and was trying my best to get her to go out with me. But she said that she wasn't feeling very well, so was going to stay home, and go to bed early.

"What is this, the old stall?" I asked. "Getting rid of the once No. 1 man with the decayed sick gag, and then going out with the other guy?"

She smiled impishly. "Uh-huh," she said. "You've hit it right on the nose, Mr. Nickolas Borden."

"I'll kill the wolf if I ever find out who he is."

She said: "You couldn't even kill a crippled fly."

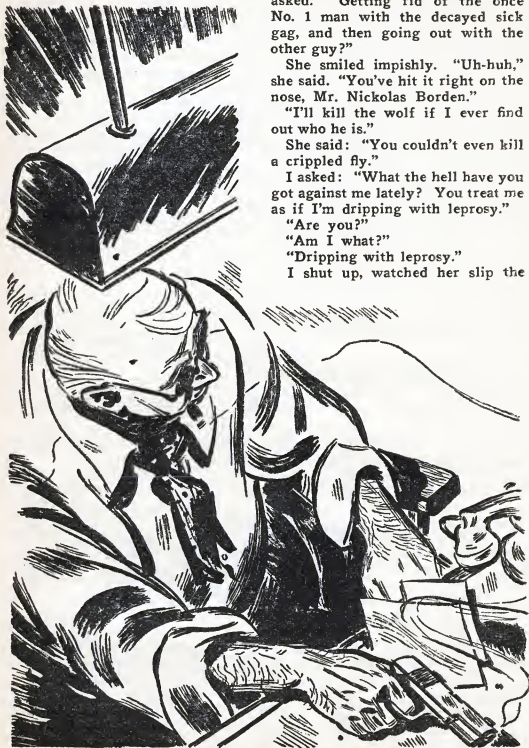
I asked: "What the hell have you got against me lately? You treat me as if I'm dripping with leprosy."

"Are you?"

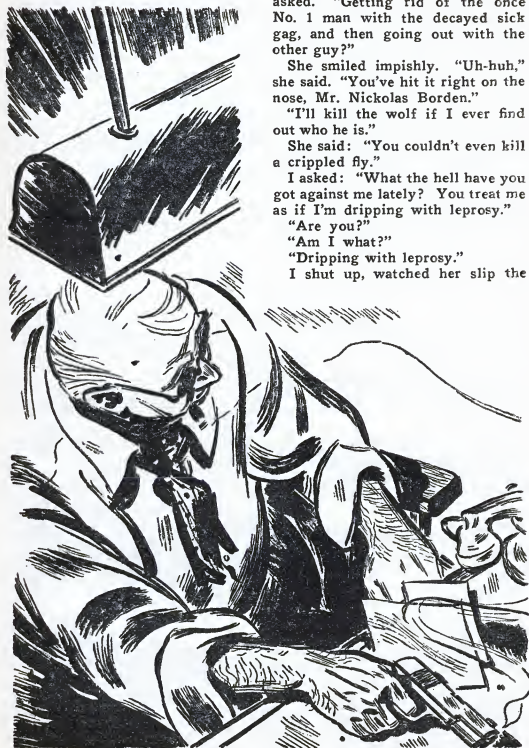
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"Am I what?"

"Dripping with leprosy."

I shut up, watched her slip the

cover over the typewriter, and open the closet door. She powdered her small nose in the mirror, and pulled a screwy-looking red hat over her black tresses. I stood up, and helped her on with her coat. Then a flock of impulses got the best of me, and I acted upon their advice. I grasped Mary by the shoulders, and whirled her around. She read my mind, struggled to free herself, not too hard, though. "Please. Please don't, Nicky," she implored in a whisper. But her eyes were whispering the opposite of her lips.

I kissed her. She went limp in my arms, and we clung to each other.

"Hate me?" I asked sotto voce.

"Uh-huh."

"A lot?"

"Uh-huh."

"Will you consider a proposition?"

She tilted her head to one side, and stated with a twinkle in her eyes: "Maybe."

"Marry me?"

She gently pushed herself from my arms. She gave me a dazzling smile. "Marry the great Nickolas Borden?" she said. She laughed. "I should say not. Do I look as crazy as that?"

I reached out to grab her. But she retreated toward the door. "Toodle-oo, Casanova." She waved one tiny hand at me, and was gone.



I shoved a cigarette into my mouth, lit it. Then I switched off the office lights, and went out into the hall, then stopped petrified.

I suddenly knew what had been wrong in the Grant suicide set-up.

The office lights had made me remember.

The medical examiner had stated that Barney killed himself between the hours of 12:30 and 1:30 a. m. It had been raining that night; had been as dark as Hades. Then how was it that the lights had been turned out in his apartment when I had entered it?

I, now, distinctly remembered putting on the lights when I had entered the apartment.

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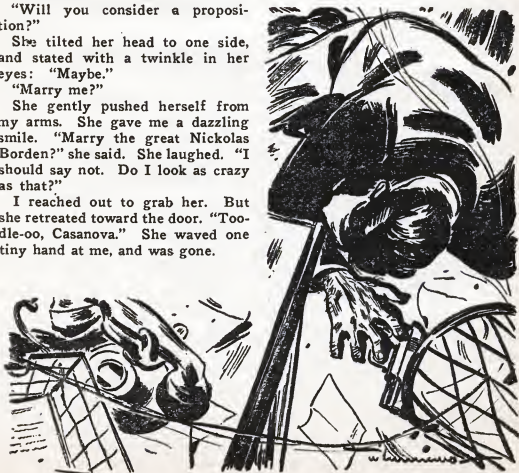
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that Barney had typed the suicide note in complete darkness. And it was more absurd to think that he had turned off the lights after he had typed the note, and that he had killed himself in complete darkness, for if I knew one thing, I knew that Barney hated the dark. He feared it. He had a phobia about it. He'd been a night-spot hound for years, he followed the lights. I knew for a fact that he even slept with the lights on, always. I'd lay anybody fifty to one that, even about to kill himself, he'd never do it in darkness.

I did not have time for any more thoughts. A gunshot jerked me out of my sordid reveries. A gunshot, here in the *Globe* building. A gunshot close by.

And that shot was immediately followed by three more in rapid succession, plunging the place into pandemonium.

The gunshots had come out of Blane's office!

I swore in puzzlement, galvanizing into immediate action. I did a Superman down the hallway, and reached Blane's office ahead of Tommy Wright and Tony Ammetto.

I flung the office door wide open, and stared. Behind me, Tommy Wright swore softly, and Tony Ammetto made funny noises deep in his throat.

Blane was sitting, slouched down a little, in the swivel chair behind his desk. His eyes were covered by dark glasses, and clutched in between his teeth was the butt of a cold cigar. There was a twisted, snarl-like expression on his face. A spreading stain of blood covered the shirt sleeve of his left arm, near the shoulder; in the fingers of his right hand, he clutched an automatic, smoke still curling out of the barrel.

Upon the floor, on the other side

of Blane's desk, close at my feet, lying face downward, was the guy. He was a small, thin man, clad in a shabby gray suit. A heavy, black automatic lay close to the fingers of his right, outflung hand.

Blane let out a deep breath, and threw his gun upon the desk with a thud. He raised one hand slowly, and took the cigar butt from his mouth, and then he swore.

"That'll teach the stinking—"

Then he smiled at me, and said, pointing at the still form at my feet: "Meet an old friend, Nicky. The illustrious Harvey Gates."

III.

Sergeant Irving Pfefferbilt lit his stogie for the third time, listening to Blane's account of the shooting.

A doctor was dressing Blane's wound. Not a serious one; only a painful flesh wound. The bullet had plowed through the flesh of his arm near the shoulder, just nicking a piece of bone.

"I was getting ready to go out," Blane was saying, "when the door opened and Gates came in. I did not recognize him at first. But when he yanked out his gun, and came toward me, I knew at once who he was, and why he was here.

"I did my best to talk myself out of the hole I was in. But it was no go. Gates was going to kill me, and that's all there was to it. He began babbling about how I was responsible for sending him to prison, and how he had planned for five long years to escape, and how he had escaped.

"While he was talking, I was gambling. Taking one last chance. I moved my hand slowly, and quietly opened the drawer where my gun was, unnoticed by him. I had the gun in my hand when he discovered

this. He screeched and fired." Blane shrugged his good shoulder. "It was simple after that. Before Gates could fire again, I killed him."

Pfefferbilt puffed on his stogie, his brow wrinkled up in concentration. Then he looked at me, and said: "As I remember it, Gates also swore to kill you, huh, Nicky?"

I nodded. "That's right, Irvy. He swore to blast me, as well as Blane, from this earth."

Pfefferbilt grunted: "Well, I guess this ends the career of Harvey Gates once and for all this time. Nice shooting, Blane."

The "morgue squad" arrived and lugged Gates out in a wicker basket.

Five years ago, Harvey Gates had been the district attorney of the city. He had been a cheap, grafting crook, and a murderer as well. Blane and myself had worked against him for months gathering evidence, and had finally exposed and smashed him. The murder charge had never been proved against him. But he had drawn twenty years on two different counts just the same.

And now he was dead.

Pfefferbilt took a slug of Blane's rye, and departed with: "Take care of yourselves, boys."

Blane took his laurels for the kill all right. He sent the *Globe* staff into action, and an extra hit the street, its banner shrieking:

**GLOBE EDITOR AND FORMER
D. A. IN GUN BATTLE**

Blane said: "You must be mistaken! You've got to be mistaken!" when I told him about the important fact which I had forgotten—which I had never known—in the Burgess-Grant affair. Then: "Are you sure, Nicky?"

"As sure as I'm standing here and talking to you. I'm telling you the

lights were turned off when I entered Barney's apartment and found him. I'm telling you, Barney Grant did not commit suicide! He was murdered!"

"But that would mean that he did not kill the Burgess kid, either. It would mean that somebody else strangled her to death!"

"It would."

He shook his head slowly. "Hell, it doesn't make sense. I could see a possible motive for killing Barney. He made hundreds of enemies with his column through all of these years. But why kill the dame?"

"That's it," I said. "That's the entire riddle of the slayings. The key. I've got a hunch that there's a strong motive behind her death. I've got a hunch that Barney's death was secondary to that of hers."

A cute, black-haired torch singer was informing the patrons that: "Jim doesn't bring me pretty flowers," when I pushed my way into the Club Paradise.

The night club was full of men, women and tobacco smoke, was elaborately decorated, and magnificently furnished.

I shoved a five-spot at the blond hat-check girl who used to share her duties with Helen Burgess, and asked a flock of questions.

"Sure, Helen and Mr. Grant were on very friendly terms. But it was strictly business between them. Helen told me that the both of them were about to pull off some sort of a deal."

"Did she say what sort of deal it was?"

"No, she didn't."

"What sort of girl was Helen Burgess?"

"Kind of hard, if you know what I mean. She had looks, and a figure,

and she certainly took advantage of them."

"How about her sex life?"

"There were a lot of guys, and whether they got past first or not, I wouldn't know."

"How about Cary Sandstorm? How did she treat him?"

"Like so much dirt under her feet."

I grabbed Howard Claymore, manager of the Paradise. He said: "Six months ago, we needed a hat-check girl. The Durant Employment Agency sent us Miss Burgess. I don't know much about her, except that she did her job satisfactorily."

I went to the bar, and did some heavy pondering over a few drinks. But I did not get any place.

So I took a powder.

In the psychopathic ward of the General Hospital, they told me that Cary Sandstorm had been transferred to the Maple Hill Sanitarium.

I climbed in a taxi, and half an hour later, alighted before the nut house.

I met defeat there.

Dr. Carlye, the head quack, absolutely refused me a session with Sandstorm.

"It is impossible, Mr. Borden. Mr. Sandstorm is in a very bad state. He cannot see anyone, not a single person, if his mentality is to be saved. You see, sir, every time he sees a fellow human, he is driven into a berserk fit. He has developed an extreme hatred for his fellowmen."

I asked a lot of questions, but the doc simply clamped his mouth shut, and shook his head. I picked up my hat. "Well, thanks anyway, doc," I said, reaching for the doorknob.

Back in town once more, I hit for the telegraph office. I sent a wire to La Crosse, Wisconsin, Helen Burgess' home town, asking the cops there to forward all the data they

could concerning the slain girl.

That done, I pushed my body toward police headquarters. The great Pfefferbilt was in his office playing penny-ante poker with his huge partner.

"How do, Nicky, my boy," he greeted. "Find any more bodies lately?"

"Hi ya," I replied, plopping down in a chair. "Nope, no more bodies."

"That's fine. Wanna join the game, Nicky?"

"Naw."

He yanked out a vicious black stogie from his vest pocket, and shoved it into his mouth. "What's bothering the great Nicky Borden?" he asked, touching a flame to the stogie.

"The Burgess-Grant case," I told him.

He let out a cloud of smoke big enough to screen a battleship, and foul enough to render an army division unconscious.

Zachowski coughed a couple of times, stood up, and opened a window. "Hot," he said in his squeaky voice.

Pfefferbilt asked: "Why should the Burgess-Grant case give you brain ulcers, Nicky?"

I told him about the lights.

He was sore, and he showed it. He jabbed his stogie at me, and demanded: "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"I just remembered today."

"You're a damned liar!"

"Have it your own way. But I'm telling you that I just remembered today."

He kept looking at me. "Again I say you're a liar, Nicky," he said softly. "You know that, don't you? Two weeks go by and he just remembers."

I shoved a cigarette into my mouth, lit it, and exhaled smoke.

Then I told them what the blond hat-check girl, Claymore, and Doc Carlye had said.

"Now, here's what you could do," I suggested. "Herd all Helen Burgess' ex-boy friends into your office, and give them a verbal going over. Maybe there's a lead there. You've still got that address book that was found in her apartment, haven't you?"

Some of the wrath left Pfefferbilt. "I see your angle, Nicky. You think that she and Barney might have been working the old badger game, huh? She dated them, and compromised them. Barney catches them, and either exposes them in his column, or settles for a nice juicy down payment."

"Something like that, Irvy," I admitted.

Pfefferbilt told Zachowski to get the Burgess-Grant file. It took four hours, and did not net us a thing. Five of the ex-boy friends had unbreakable alibis. The rest claimed that they were either in bed asleep at the time of the murders, or out walking—and could not prove it. It was a matter of taking their word for it or not.

Five of the ex-boy friends were respectable, married men. And all the ex-boy friends had plenty of the good old do-re-mi.

Not one of them admitted being played the sucker. Not one of them was instructed to either pay up or suffer the consequences. It was preposterous. Did the good sergeant know what he was hinting at? Why, it had been nothing but a platonic friendship between them. And if any gifts had been given, it had been simply out of brotherly, or fatherly love.

Two of the younger gents, half in the bag at this time, came right out with it. Certainly Helen Burgess had been easy to make, and had been made. So what, eh? What the hell was this, anyway?

When the last of the wolves departed, Pfefferbilt flung the cold butt of his fourth stogie into the wastebasket, and again cursed me.

"That's gratitude for you," I said. "I do the guy a favor, and he—"

"A favor!" he sneered. "Why, if it wasn't for you, I'd have had this case cleared up two weeks ago. If it wasn't for you, my hands would've been washed of it. Now, I've got troubles. Now, I've got worries. Now, I've got to strain my brain solving a case that's two weeks cold. And he says he's doing me a favor!" He rose to his feet. "Nicky, so help me, I'm gonna skin you alive! I'm gonna boil you in oil! I'm gonna—"

"The trouble with you, Irving," I

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broke in, "is that you stink as much as your weeds do!"

I ducked through the door just in time. A heavy book came flying at me, missing me by inches.

I was whistling a tune when I switched on the lights in my apartment. The whistle got stuck where my tonsils used to be, and gagged me. I could only stare at first, then my voice refound itself, and I groaned.

A corpse lay on my living-room carpet! There was the stem of a highball glass clutched in one of his outflung hands! The remains of the smashed glass were scattered on the carpet!

I bent over the body. I recognized the dead man. His name was Frankie Duncan, a small-time crook. A huge question mark formed in my brain, and teased my intelligence.

I picked up the phone, and dialed headquarters. "Irvy," I said, "hop in a squad car, and whiz out to my place. Believe it or not, but I've just found another corpse!"

When Pfefferbilt got through swearing at me, he bellowed: "Go to hell!"

I said: "O. K., Irvy, I'm on my way there. But, in the meantime, what should I do with the corpse? Chuck it out the window? Or take it to hell with me?"

Pfefferbilt and two of his boys arrived fifteen minutes later. He glared at me, let me have another barrage of foul words, then went to work.

In Frankie Duncan's pockets the following loot was found: two men's wrist watches, three women's wrist watches, three bracelets, two sets of cuff links, seven rings (variety) and eighty-eight dollars and seventy-five cents in cash.

An investigation proved that five

apartments in the hotel had been entered and robbed; proved that the loot on Duncan's body belonged to the occupants; proved that Duncan had been on the prowl tonight, and had indulged himself in second-story work.

Duncan had robbed five apartments in the hotel, and had finally ended up in my place; which he robbed also—one wrist watch, and twenty bucks—then, finding the Scotch, and me out, he proceeded to mix himself a drink. He had mixed the drink, had gulped it down, and had fallen dead.

"Cyanide poisoning," the medical examiner stated. "There's enough cyanide in this bottle of Scotch to kill an army."

The full implication of the M. E.'s words hit me, and made me gag on my breath once more. That poisoned Scotch had been intended for me! If the unfortunate Frankie Duncan had not stopped to wet his parched tonsils while robbing my apartment, I would have been dead, instead of him!

Hell, Frankie Duncan had saved my life!

Mary Trent was busy at the filing cabinet when I entered the Society Room early the next morning. She looked up and smiled at me.

"Hi ya, small, dark and beautiful," I greeted. "How's the old gal on this very elegant and cheery morning?"

"Hello, Nicky," she replied tightly. "I hear that somebody almost poisoned you last night. Cyanide, wasn't it?"

"Yep. Nothing but the deadliest poison for me. They know how tough I am to kill."

"Too bad Frankie Duncan had to die."

"Yeah, isn't it?"

"I-it should have been you," she said, hardly above a whisper, and then did an amazing thing. She started sobbing.

"Here, here," I laughed. "What goes on?"

She was in my arms. A soft bundle of delight. She buried her small face against my chest, and continued sobbing.

I stroked her soft hair. "What a sissy you turned out to be, gorgeous."

"Oh, Nicky. I'm so-o afra-ha-id—"

I held her at arms' length. Tears were caressing her velvety-smooth cheeks. "I'm not worth crying over, Mary," I said softly. "I'm a louse. If I'd died last night, I'd have died, and the world would be rid of me."

"I know y-you're a lou-louse," she sobbed. "I . . . I know y-you're no-o good—"

"Then why the tears?"

"I . . . I d-don't know."

I kissed her small, wet mouth. Time elapsed while I comforted her, and cuddled her, and promised to be extra careful from now on. Her tears vanished, and she asked: "But why, Nicky? Why should anyone have tried to kill you?"

I told her the new developments in the Burgess-Grant case.

"Murdered, Nicky!" she exclaimed. "Murdered!"

"Yep, murdered. I guess I must have stumbled on something important, that's why the killer tried to do away with me last night. Lucky for me Duncan happened along, and got a craving for my booze, otherwise, I'd be pushing up the daisies now."

Mary started sobbing again. She was scared that the murderer, whoever he was, would try to get me again.

I showed her my .32, and said: "I wish the hell he tries."

The office door was thrust open, and Jackie, the copy boy, stuck his long nose into the room. "Ah, Mr. Nicky Finn, I knew I'd find you here."

Mary and I disentangled ourselves. She with a slight flush of embarrassment. And I with a wave of wrath. I waved a fist at the kid. "Next time I'm gonna make you eligible for a set of store teeth," I lashed, "if you even again stick your oversized beezee into a room I'm in without knocking."

He flashed his pearly white teeth at me. "Always the kiddie, hey, Nicky!" He laughed. He handed me a yellow envelope. "Telegram for you, sport."

I tore it open. It was from La Crosse, Wisconsin. It was a long telegram. Most of it dealt with the life of Helen Burgess which I already knew. It was the last paragraph that sent my heart dancing with new hope.

IN 1933 H. B. WAS A WITNESS WHEN ONE FRANK P. MISSION STRUCK A WOMAN AND CHILD WITH CAR AND KILLED THEM INSTANTLY.

I left Mary gaping with amazement, when I ran out of her office. I pushed the torso into the "morgue room." Pop Stirling found me some clippings of Frank P. Mission.

Briefly: Frank P. Mission, an insurance agent, while driving in an intoxicated state, hit a Mrs. Williams, a widow, and her six-year-old son, killing them instantly.

Helen Burgess, seventeen-year-old La Crosse resident, who witnessed the hit-and-run, stated: "Mr. Mission was traveling at about sixty miles an hour. Mrs. Williams, and her son Tommy were crossing the street. Mr. Mission went right on through the red stop light, and hit

them. It was awful. There were screams, and shrieks, and Mrs. Williams' and Tommy's bodies were dragged for about one hundred yards before Mr. Mission could stop the car. Mr. Mission lurched out of the car, took one look at what he had done, jumped back into the car, and drove away. He looked very drunk. I remember screaming, when I saw the bloody bodies. Then, I guess, I fainted."

A dragnet had been swung for the apprehension of Mission. But the police had never caught him. And until this day, if he wasn't already dead, the hit-and-run murderer was on the loose.

I sent another telegram to La Crosse. The answer came.

FRANK P. MISSION NEVER APPREHENDED FOR HIS CRIME. DESCRIPTION FOLLOWS:

(1933 DESCRIPTION)

AGE: 39.

Height: 5' 7".

WEIGHT: 150.

COLOR OF EYES: GRAY.

COLOR OF HAIR: DARK BROWN.

CURLY.

COMPLEXION: LIGHT.

OTHER OBVIOUS PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS THAT WILL AID IN IDENTIFICATION: SCAR ON FOREHEAD OVER LEFT EYE. STRAWBERRY-COLORED, CRESCENT-SHAPED BIRTHMARK ON UPPER PART OF LEFT ARM.

NO PHOTO AVAILABLE. FINGERPRINTS FOLLOW.

I stared at the line that said: "Scar on forehead over left eye. Strawberry-colored, crescent-shaped birthmark on upper part of left arm."

I read and reread that a dozen times.

"Hell!" I exclaimed. "Hell! It couldn't be! It just couldn't! It must be a coincidence!"

Then facts began to filter in and out of my brain like an army on the

march. "But it is possible. Sure, it is. It fits together like a jig-saw puzzle. Holy halleluia! If only I'm dreaming!"

Yeabo, I had a pretty good idea who the murderer of Helen Burgess and Barney Grant was; who the wanted Frank P. Mission was!

IV.

I secured a set of fingerprints, and visited Doc Sutherland, fingerprint and ballistic expert in the police lab.

He worked silently for fifteen or twenty minutes, which seemed more like fifteen to twenty years to me, then finally turned to me, and stated: "These fingerprints are of one and the same man, Nicky. I'll stake my reputation on that."

I almost let out a yell of utter triumph. Praise be! The case was in the bag. Solved. It was simple. I thanked doc a thousand times, and scrambled.

Blane was in his office when I entered. "Hi ya, my friend," I greeted. "Well, I did it."

He laid down the blue pencil, shoved some copy aside, and asked: "Did what, Nicky?"

"Cracked the Burgess-Grant case wide open."

He half rose out of his chair, then sank back slowly. "Let's have it, Nicky," he said quietly.

I sat down on the edge of his desk, lit a cigarette, and gave him my deductions. "Here's the way I figured it: Helen Burgess and Barney Grant were murdered by a wanted killer named Frank P. Mission. Nine years ago, the Burgess kid saw the drunken Mission kill a widow and her child with his car. She identified Mission to the cops. A dragnet was spread. But Mission eluded it, and escaped from the city, from the State. The police gave up

the search. And Mission went among the wanted, but missing.

"Then about a month ago, Helen Burgess saw someone whom she recognized as the wanted Frank P. Mission from her home town. She didn't yell copper, because in nine years Helen Burgess had changed from sweet innocence to a hard, wise babe. So when she met Barney Grant, she laid a proposition before him, whereby the both of them would bleed Mission dry.

"They tried it; but Mission didn't pay off in dough. He murdered the both of them instead. He strangled Helen Burgess, and left clues pointing at Barney. Then he grabbed Barney himself, in Barney's apartment, knocked him unconscious. Using Barney's fingers, he typed the confession and suicide note. That done, he sat Barney in the easy-chair, placed a gun in Barney's lifeless fingers, and made the unconscious Barney send a bullet into his own brain by squeezing on his trigger finger.

"The murderer then arranged everything to look as though suicide had been committed, and scrambled, making the fatal mistake of turning out the lights. And when this murderer learned that fact yesterday, and knew that I was going to do an awful lot of snooping around, he became scared that I might stumble onto something. He poisoned my Scotch to get rid of me. Lucky for me that Duncan came around and had first try at the poisoned booze."

I stopped and crushed out my cigarette. "I've just returned from the murderer's apartment," I said quietly. "I found his trunks already packed, indicating that he was planning to skip out real soon. Tonight maybe."

The next move was entirely unexpected on my part. Even though

my hand had been on the gun in my coat pocket during the entire recital, I never had the chance to use it, because Blane had swung a fist with unexpected suddenness, caught me flush on the jaw with it. I was flung from the edge of the desk, and onto the floor. I was swearing at my stupidity, and trying to get the gun into action, when Blane snarled: "Try it, Nicky, and I'll blow your brains out!"

He was on his feet. There was a gun in his hand. The same gun with which he had blasted Harvey Gates from the face of this earth. The barrel of that gun was lined with my head. I knew that if I got out of line the slightest bit, that same gun would spit sudden death once more.

My hand dropped away, and I rose to my feet. "You're a stinking skunk, Mr. Frank P. Mission," I said to Blane.

He was smiling slightly. "You're a marvel, Nicky," he said. "I want to congratulate you on your very brilliant deductions. It was amazing, even though I did make that stupid mistake of turning out the lights."

I tried a bluff. "You might as well give up, Blane. The cops know all about you. You'll never leave this building. They'll nab you just as soon as you do. And they'll pump you full of lead at the slightest resistance."

He laughed softly. "Who in the hell do you think you're kidding, Nicky? You'd sooner cut off your arms and legs, than sick the cops on me, or anybody, like that."

I shrugged. "Have it your own way, smart guy."

He relieved me of my gun.

"Tell me, Nicky," he said. "How did you find out that I was Frank Mission? I changed considerably

during these nine years. That old description would never fit me. And there were no photos available."

"There were two things that you couldn't change, Blane. The scar over your left eye, and that strawberry-colored, crescent-shaped birthmark on your left arm. I saw it when Gates plugged you, and when the doctor dressed your wound."

"I should have thought of that," Blane replied with a nod.

I asked: "What the hell was the reason for calling up Mary that night, and telling her that Helen Burgess was dead? What'd you want—a scoop of the murders, or to make a final check-up, to see that everything was according to plan?"

"Both," he said.

He was silent as he contemplated his next move. Arriving at a decision, he ordered me to turn around, and to go out of the office. "Remember," he cautioned, "one funny move, one misstep, and I'll blast you into hell."

I opened the door, and went out. Blane followed. We walked through the city room, and out of the building. "Where are all your cops, Nicky?" he sneered.

"They're the little men who aren't here," I said.

His car was parked at the curb. "In the front, Nicky. And drive for the outskirts," he ordered and got into the back seat of the car himself.

I took a look at the *Globe* building, and started the car.

"Hell," I thought, "I won't be able to marry Mary, after all." I laughed at the play of words. "Marry Mary." It sounded nice. Like poetry.

Blane said: "Remember this, Nicky. If you should get reckless all of a sudden, and attempt something foolish, like crashing the car, remember this: If I should escape injury, serious injury, the first per-

son that I'll seek out will be Mary Trent. And remember this, too: Her death won't be a pleasant one. Do we understand one another, Nicky?"

A long, narrow dirt road led into a dense forest. In a sense, it wasn't a road at all. Just a pair of tire tracks. The young people used this road occasionally to pitch woo in. It was dubbed "Lovers' Highway." A nice, desolate place.

We reached the end of the line, deep inside the forest. "Out, Nicky," Blane said in a very quiet voice.

I got out of the car. He told me to head for the trees. I did. I heard him following. My body was tense, expecting a stream of hot bullets. But he did not fire.

I thought: "Gosh, Mary is beautiful. Like moonlight and roses. Why, everything about her is beautiful. Her smile, her walk, even her tears. I'll sure miss her. Cripes, I'll miss her. But why should I miss her? Fight, you fool! Don't take it lying down! There has to be a way out of this! But remember! Failure means death for Mary, also! Yeah, so die, and let her live! You're a fool, anyway."

Blane's voice said: "Turn around, Nicky."

I faced him. He stood about a dozen feet from me. The gun in his hand seemed to be sneering at me. "I'm sorry, but I've got to kill you, Nicky. You know that, don't you?" His finger tensed on the trigger. It relaxed, and he added: "I've never wanted to kill anyone, Nicky. I wasn't born a murderer. First, it was the booze, then a pair of stinking leechers, and now you. I did not want to kill, and I don't want to kill, but I have to, and I had to, because I'm human and I love life. And nobody is going to take it away from me. Good-by, Nicky, boy."

A shot blasted loud and clear in the forest. I thought: "Funny, but I don't feel any pain. Hell, it isn't so tough to die. A cinch."

Then I realized the truth. Blane had not fired! He had been shot instead! The gun had fallen from his fingers. His mouth was wide-open in amazement. He stood swaying on his feet, and his eyes were blaming me. He thought that I was responsible for shooting him!

I took a step toward him, and he fell flat on his face. There was a spreading stain of blood on the back of his coat.

Footsteps thudded, and crashed upon dead leaves and branches, as somebody came running toward me. I stared. It was Pfefferbilt's big partner, Andy Zachowski!

Down at headquarters, Pfefferbilt said: "That's the way it is, Nicky. You were finding too damn many bodies to suit me. So to keep in step with you, I put Zachy on your tail."

I smiled at the both of them. "From now on," I said, "I'm a cop lover. From this day on, cops, to

me, are the swellest fellows on this earth. Cops are beautiful. Cops are gorgeous. I'm going to love them all. Pfefferbilt, I love you. Zachy, I love you, too. I love you most of all. And now, if you'll excuse me—"

Pfefferbilt knocked ashes from his stogie. He waved a pudgy hand at me. "Certainly," he chuckled. "Glad to get rid of you."

I headed for the door, then thought of something. I grabbed Zachowski by the arm and dragged him through the door. "First, Zachy, my pal," I told him, "I'm gonna buy you a dozen drinks—"

Zachowski smacked his lips.

Outside the newsies were screeching: "Extra, Extra! Reporter breaks murder case! Extra, extra!"

"And after you've had the drinks, Zachy," I went on, "you are going to be best man."

Zachowski looked amazed. "Who's gettin' hitched?" he wanted to know.

"I am," I said. "I'm going to marry a certain black-haired society editor, even if I have to kidnap her, or break her lovely neck to do it."

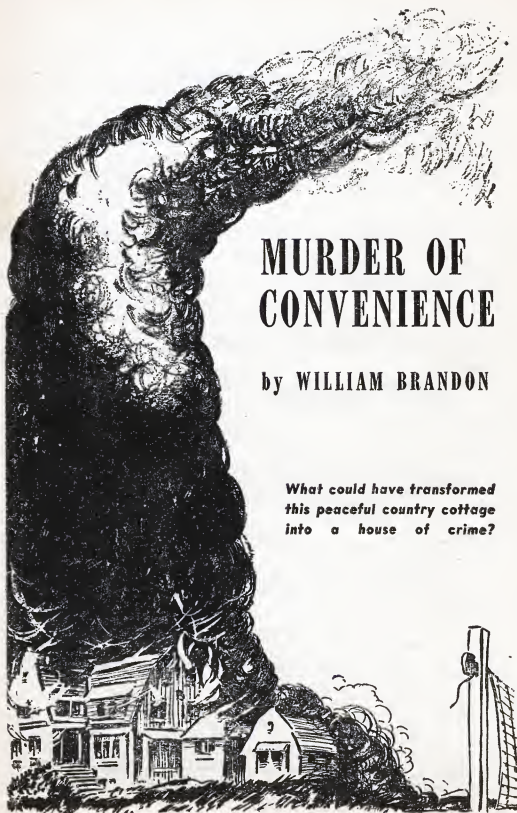
THE END.

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CHARACTER QUIZ

*in enclosing sample
ing I showed you in office
the writing on the card is*

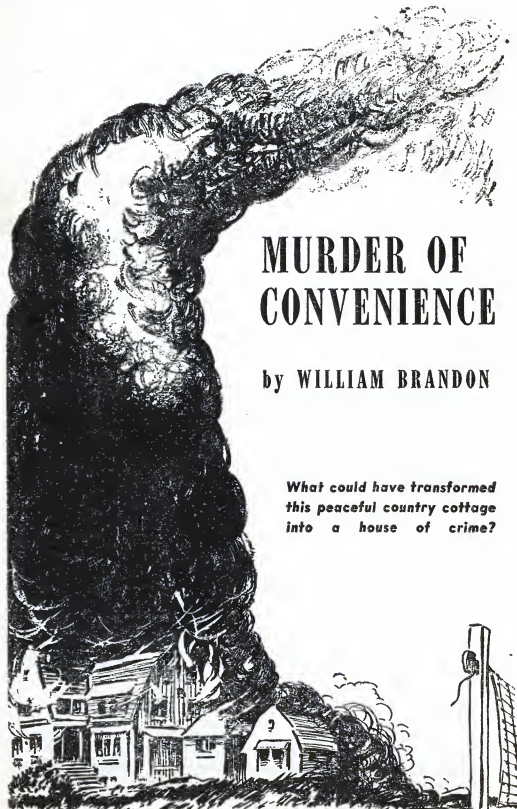
How are you getting along with your handwriting analysis? Here is another sample of handwriting to tempt your analytical powers. What does a sudden heavy downstroke mean? Would you say this writer is good-natured and even-tempered? Has she imagination? Is she intuitive? You'll find a complete analysis on page 160.



MURDER OF CONVENIENCE

by WILLIAM BRANDON

*What could have transformed
this peaceful country cottage
into a house of crime?*



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Sam and Marge bought a piece of land in Vermont and built a neat white Cape Codder on it. It was June when they moved in, and I went up in July for a week end. It was a very nice place, on a hill overlooking the Connecticut River and a clustering tiny green-and-white village. There were some large locust trees in the yard and pine woods stretching over the hills behind the house. A trout stream was some place near. I could hear it, but I never got to see it. The effect was almost too hushed and peaceful to be real, as if an artist had just painted the whole thing and would presently attach a brass plate reading: Serenity.

"Like it?" Marge asked.

"I would gladly trade you Manhattan Island for it," I said, "and throw in the Indians."

"Look how far you can see up and down the river," Sam said proudly. "The most beautiful view I've ever seen. We looked all over New England before we found this."

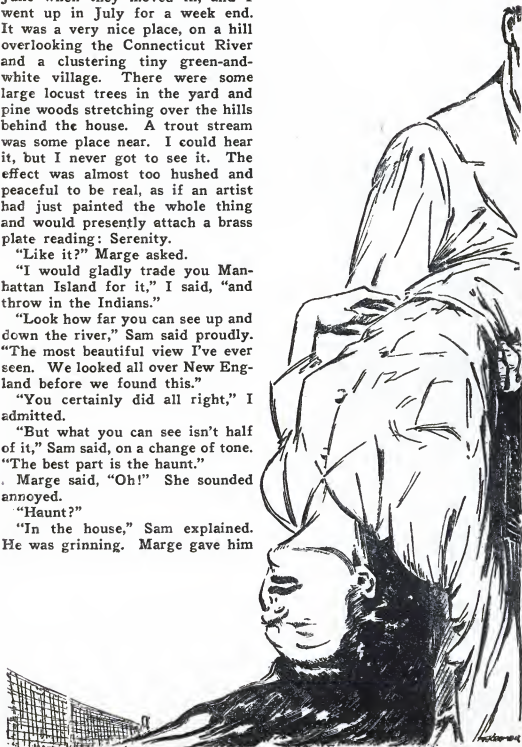
"You certainly did all right," I admitted.

"But what you can see isn't half of it," Sam said, on a change of tone. "The best part is the haunt."

Marge said, "Oh!" She sounded annoyed.

"Haunt?"

"In the house," Sam explained. He was grinning. Marge gave him



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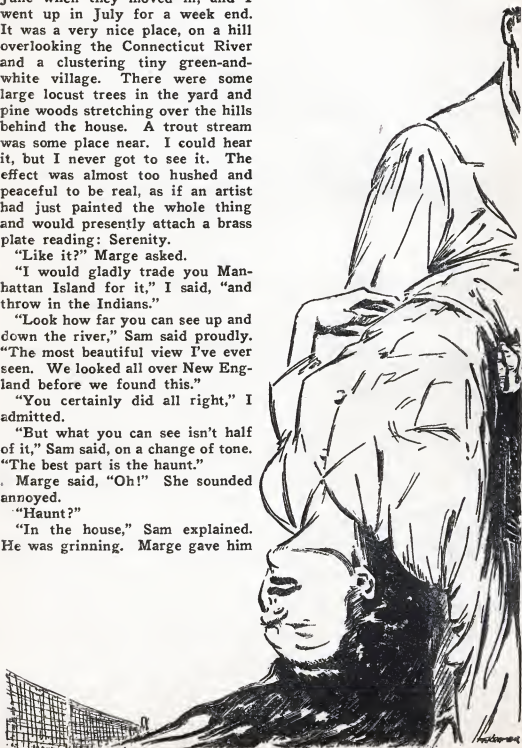
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a hard look. "We built on the site an old house that burned down in 1907. We built right over the old cellar hole. Turned out the place was haunted."

"It's nothing on earth but an old wives' tale," Marge interrupted. "It seems an old couple lived alone in the house that used to stand here and they weren't able to get out when it burned down. And the next day three bodies were found in the ashes instead of two, and no one has ever found out who the third person was."

"You tell it very badly," Sam said, still grinning. "Let—"

"The thing to do is not tell it at all," Marge said tartly.

"I thought it was good for a laugh," Sam said.

"It's simply a scream. Let me show you our swimming pool, Barney. Come on around the house. Ten by thirty. If you dive too far, you go right over it."

"Wait a minute," I said. "This story about the extra body sounds interesting. What's the rest of it?"

"There isn't anything else to it," Marge said. "The extra body never was identified. They preserved it up at Montpelier for about twenty years, they say. Naturally, some of the people in the village got to saying the farm was haunted."

"Well," I asked, "is it?"

"Is it?" Sam said. "Boy, wait until you hear the guy shuffling up and down the halls at night, and running around the cellar trying to get out—"

"Stop it," Marge ordered.

"I forgot," Sam said. "Barney's allergic to ghosts." He struggled to keep from grinning and looked concerned.

"In a pig's eye you forgot!" Marge exclaimed. "Sometimes, Sam, I could kill you."

"I'm scared to death," I said. The words didn't have the light quality I wanted. I really am allergic to ghosts. That's a polite way of saying I'm afraid of ghosts. Well, my grandmother was psychic. She used to tell me stories and scare the hell out of me when I was a kid.

"Well, you leave Barney alone," Marge said. "You're afraid of horses yourself. What if he'd throw a horse at you?"

"To tell the truth," Sam said, watching me delightedly, "I always thought that graveyard whistling act of yours was a gag, Barney."

"That's right. It's a gag. Forget about it." I hated Sam's guts.

Sam chuckled and said: "Well, I'm sorry I brought it up."

"O. K.," I said. "Then shut up about it."

"O. K.," Sam said, on a high note. "You don't have to get sore about it."

"Shut up," Marge screamed. "Shut up, shut up, shut up, both of you!"

Marge is red-haired. When she wants it, she can bring out a planet-smashing temper that Gargantua would back away from. She also has green eyes and a figure that the press agent used to refer to habitually as exquisite, when Marge was singing songs in the road company of "Melissa." The exquisite Marjory Bent.

I was the press agent. Press agents sometimes marry girls out of their shows. I was dreaming up a plot like that when we returned to New York, and she met Sam Bishop.

Showgirls sometimes marry young guys with dough, also. It was very nice. The elopement was romantic and gave the company some space. The company gave Marge a present that cost too much and threw a party for her. Sam enjoyed the party, he was very democratic, and he made a

large hit with all concerned. They were starry-eyed and very happy. They were two lucky kids. They were made for each other. Marge was beautiful and Sam was rich. They were so happy, the wardrobe mistress said, it made you want to cry. She did cry. It was touching.

Marge conceived the idea that Sam and I should be friends. She saw me as an old friend of the family. The mellow type. Solving their little problems, tendering fatherly advice when they should run to him after their little quarrels. Plainly, Sam disliked the idea as much as I did. But for a year or so I'd been acting the part. You did, for Marge. And at least I was around.

Sam said: "O. K., sugar, I talk too much," and squeezed her arm, and squeezed good humor back into his face, and buried the needle for the time being.

Marge took my arm with one hand and Sam's with the other. "The pool," she said. "I'll throw you both in."

We moved away like the good companions. I glanced back at the house. It reared up white and glaring in the sun. Like a tombstone.

There was another guest, a fish-faced wench who used too much make-up and was as coy as a black widow spider. Her name was Bessie Smith. She was a school friend of Marge's. I had never met her before, but then I did not go to school with Marge.

In the evening, we went down to the village to a square dance. That is an energetic pastime, dancing square dances. You stomp and jig around, and it looks easy and you are surprised how soon you are coked, while withered old folks carry on all around you without taking a deep breath, and you decide

you are out of condition and will have to start breathing in front of open windows. I dropped out after a couple of sets and presently Bessie Smith joined me.

She talked a while and then gave me a pouting look and said, "You're not paying any attention to me."

"I was listening to that caller," I said. "I've never heard one before."

"Oh," she said brightly, turning her face toward the floor and arranging her elbows on the little table. "Let's listen."

"The mare is stole,
Let the old gal be.
Tread away lightly,
Two and three."

"Isn't that cute?" Bessie Smith said. She glanced at me, followed the direction of my eyes, and said, "Oh, there's Marge." I looked back at the caller.

"For we'll get her back,
When come the fall.
Swing your pardner,
Balance all!"

The town-hall floor shook to the stamping feet. The dancers seemed to be having a good time. Everyone is a jitterbug at a square dance. Marge was laughing, her head back, her red hair streaming down to her shoulders, shaking, catching dull-gold glints of light.

"Where's the greaser, ma'am?
Sam et it.
Well, cuss his guts,
And don't forget it."

The fiddle took a long break, riding it out as near to Venuti as I've ever heard. The five-piece orchestra was young and pretty good. They also played popular, round-dance stuff, and then were not so good. The rhythm crept around the hall, touching everything with its beat,

the walls, the lights, the little tables, the blood. The caller was out of breath. The orchestra pounded on, the fiddle slithering madly. My feet began to tap, accenting the beat. My eyes followed Marge. Her excitement, the excitement in unison of everything around me, entered my veins like a drug. Four to the measure, four to the beat of your heart.

"Give me a light, please," Bessie Smith said.

She was myopic. She leaned toward me, her mouth pursed around the cigarette, and goggled at the match.

She asked suddenly, "Are you really afraid of ghosts, Barney?"

"Ghosts?" I said. "What is a ghost?"

She giggled. "Sam said you were. Have you ever seen a ghost?"

"Sure. There's one swimming in your beer."

"No, really. No kidding. It seems so silly."

Her lips were vermilion. Her teeth were not quite white; a speck of lipstick was smeared on one. Her black hair was heavy and thick and too smooth and glossy, with little beads of grease at the part. Her eyelashes were too black, coated with something, black above half-moons of purple eyeshadow. Her fingernails were not clean. Her hands were nervous, and her smile was blank, almost professional. She was disconcerted when I studied her.

She said, "I think Marge has become awfully attractive, don't you?"

"Become?"

"Well, in school she was rather gangling. Just the awkward age, I suppose. We were at Smith together, you know."

It was difficult to pair Marge with Bessie Smith. Especially, since

Marge hadn't gone to Smith. She was a Bennington product.

"Oh, gimme my hat
And let me go,
A one-two-three
And a do-si-do."

I went to bed at midnight and slept like a log. A wonderful place for sleeping. The spice of the pines in the cool air and a deep, soothing quiet over the hills. Fireflies winking in the night outside the window, a whippoorwill whistling faintly in the distance.

About four o'clock something woke me up. A voice. A shrill voice calling something over and over, almost like a whistle.

The room was dark, but the faint light of early morning was framed in the window, and outside the stars were pale. The whippoorwill, or another one, was some place very close outside the window. I had never realized before how loud their whistle is. As loud as a police whistle; shrill, ringing.

It was the whistle that woke me up, I thought. I was sitting up in bed, looking around at the darkness, feeling sweat on my face and on my hands. I had been dreaming of a voice, I thought. That whippoorwill woke me up.

I turned on the light and got out of bed and stood there, looking around. There was no one else in the room.

I felt cold. I put on a dressing gown and opened the hall door. The house was quiet. Some place downstairs I could hear a clock ticking. The light from my room fanned over a segment of the hall, but the rest of the corridor was dark. I peered up and down, holding to the latch of my door.

There was a footstep some place, a distinct thud, as if someone walk-

ing hastily, barefooted, over a carpet, had taken one step on a space of bare floor. A door closed; a latch clicked. I couldn't locate the sounds.

I went back in my room and shut the door. For five minutes or so I sat on the bed, listening to the whippoorwill, rubbing the palms of my hands against the dressing gown, watching the door.

What the hell, there's no law against people getting up at night.

But I had the feeling, something about the sound of that single step, that it had been someone running.

There's no law against that, either.

I turned out the light and went back to bed.

The chant of the whippoorwill faded, and I dozed and dreamed ungodly dreams.

I was high on a flight of steps above a monstrous, scaled and rusty caldron, enveloped now and again in rising clouds of mist and steam. In the vat a viscous fluid simmered, an oily liquid colored garish vermillion, but turning black and red again. A scum came to its surface and it boiled. Blisters rose on the scum and burst with sluggish plops.

It eddied and writhed, and the vermillion and the black ribboned together and turned and joined at points and formed figures, squares and circles, and shaped almost into the semblance of a gaudy face that simpered up at me and stared around with blank, insane eyes, and then the face contorted in pain and the eyes rolled up to show blind whites, egg-gray and veined with scarlet, and the face sank back and faded; the coiling red and black stripes invaded each other; the caldron, the steps, everything around me was hotly illuminated by a flash of orange light, and the black and the red had become fire, vermillion licking flames, black oily smoke, mush-

rooming up, engulfing me.

I threw the covers off and jumped out of bed, shivering.

Outside, the sun was up; my room was hot; through the open window, I heard sounds of breakfast from the kitchen downstairs.

"Sleep all right?" Sam asked.

"Like a top," I replied.

"You mean to say you didn't hear—"

"For gosh sakes, dear," Marge said, "don't start that again this morning."

"I mean it! I did hear something. No joke about it."

"You drank too much brandy last night."

"Oh. I beg your pardon. I must have been delirious."

"You were blotto, darling, if it's the same thing."

"Now, of course, Barney doesn't drink," Sam said irrelevantly. His eyes were sultry.

It's an old training-table habit. My secret vice. I don't drink. But I seem to live.

"Something wrong with that?" I asked.

Marge put her hands flat on the table and sighed. I thought she looked very attractive. Her red-gold hair was tousled, and she had not put on any make-up. She looked sleepy and contented and tiny and wistful. With a little imagination, I could shut out Sam and Bessie Smith and call it breakfast at home. But that was a dismal percentage.

"I wouldn't know," Sam said.

Marge picked up her coffee cup. "I'm not above throwing this. Do you gentlemen understand what I mean?"

Bessie Smith giggled. "Not to change the subject, I actually did hear something last night. Like

someone in the house. I was scared."

"You probably heard the refrigerator," Marge said. "Something's wrong with it, and it clanks when it runs."

"I used to know a fellow," Sam said, digging into his grapefruit, "who clanked when he ran. Sword swallower." He laughed heartily.

"There was a very old Chinaman once," I said, "whose greatest wish was to get a job as number one boy with a famous English explorer. But he couldn't meet the explorer, so he got a job in a restaurant. Well, one day the explorer came in for breakfast and the old man hurried to give him a menu, which listed a number one and two and three breakfast, and a special club breakfast, orange juice, toast and coffee. The explorer studied the menu for a long time, and at last he said to the old Chinese, 'Number one, boy.' And so the old man was very happy."

"I'd rather you fought," Marge said.

We finished breakfast in silence.

The day was very hot. We spent a lot of time in the swimming pool. We talked about going over to Tickelnaked Pond, where some friends of Sam's owned an island, but we didn't go. In the afternoon, Bessie Smith maneuvered me into some tennis.

She explained that some very big tennis people had complimented her on her service. Fast and powerful for a woman, she said. Well, it was distinctive. She wound up and teed off, and anything could happen. Sometimes the ball went into the net, sometimes over the house. Once she pounded it out of sight, for a home run. It probably went over the river. She played with a great deal of enthusiasm.

"I'm afraid I'm off my game today," she said breathlessly, after serving into the swimming pool. "I can't find the court."

"Keep looking," I told her. "It's probably just mislaid some place."

She doubled back and smashed a ball in my general direction. It sang away in a quarterly trajectory, cleared the backstop, and I heard glass tinkle back at the house.

"Now I've done it," Bessie said. "It must have hit a window."

I trotted to the house. All windows seemed intact. And then I spotted the hit, one of the small basement windows. I went into the house and down to the cellar after the ball, and found it beside the oil burner.

There was a smell of kerosene around the basement stairs. It was strong. I thought the stuff might be leaking from something, and looked around for it.

I found it, a five-gallon can pushed out of sight under the stairway. It wasn't leaking, but it had been recently filled, and kerosene had spilled over the top, around the cap. I could see the wet marks on the cement floor where the can had been shoved under the steps.

It had been put there not many hours before. But I hadn't noticed them buying any kerosene. None of us had been down to the village that day, and no truck had been out to deliver it. Funny, how a thing like that will sometimes puzzle you. Ordinarily, I would have done no more than glance at the can to see that it wasn't leaking. But I wondered about it, and bent over the can again and studied it, started to unscrew the cap.

My sleeve caught on a nail, projecting from the steps, and I turned to free it, and saw a coil of new white cord gleaming under the fuel-

oil tanks. A glistening white, like salt. I went over to the tanks and reached under them and drew the cord out. It was stiff, wiry. It had a faint, peculiar odor.

It was a length of fuse.

After some time I replaced the fuse and went back upstairs and out to the tennis court.

Bessie Smith had gone away. I wandered around, not looking for her particularly, and saw Marge in her white swimming suit taking a sun bath beside the pool.

I sat down beside her and lit a cigarette. "Would that I had my easel," I said.

"Give me one," she commanded. I put a cigarette between her lips and struck a match for her. The smoke choked her, and she sat up. She stretched luxuriously. "Hm-m-m. I feel like a cat. A great, big, brown, lazy cat. Look at my tan."

"Where's Sam?" I asked. "Out in the woods with Bessie?"

"I imagine so," she said contentedly. "Who's Sam to withstand Bessie's fatal charm?" Her dark glasses looked at me, and she wrinkled her nose and laughed.

"Who's Sam is right," I said.

"Now we sound like a couple of cats," she murmured. "I wish you'd like Sam, Barney. After all, you two guys are all I've got."

"Well, I wish you'd like Bessie," I said.

"Oh, I'm serious."

"So am I. I'm going to marry her. She's the woman I love."

"You idiot!"

"She's going to be my wife. I want you to like her. She's really fine and good and beautiful, underneath."

"After you scrape off the paint?"

"It hurts me for you to talk like that," I said. "After all, you two are

all I've got. I want you to be friends. Good friends. We'll let the kiddies call you Aunt Marge. We'll name one after you. You can send them expensive presents at Christmas."

"If you're trying to be bitter, you're awfully corny about it."

"Bitter? Why should I be bitter? I'm the happiest man on earth."

"Oh, stop it."

I heard steps running across grass, and Bessie came into sight, running toward the house. She was holding a handkerchief to her face. It was bloody.

"Sam defended himself," I said.

Marge jumped up and called to Bessie. Bessie stopped and looked at us, and then bent over and shook her head. Drops of blood sprinkled scarlet in the sun.

We reached her, and Marge straightened her up. I thought Bessie was crying. It turned out she was laughing.

"By dose idd bloddied," she said, as if she was excusing a social error. She continued to giggle and shake her head.

"How on earth did it happen?" Marge said.

"I sdumbled over something and dell down. I wad going to look add the droud sdream. Look, idd's all over me."

"Well, come on in the house," Marge said. "Doesn't it hurt?"

Bessie went on shaking her head. "Idd's so silly," she said.

Sam came in half an hour later. He had, he said, been down at the brook waiting for a deer that came every day to drink. He wanted to take a picture of it. He had his camera with him. But he hadn't been able to get a picture. He had made some noise, and the deer had run away. It wasn't until dinner that I noticed his knuckles were skinned.

I tried to stay awake that night. I kept my watch under my pillow and looked at it occasionally in the faint light from the window. One o'clock passed. Two. I was very sleepy. I decided I was making a mistake. Sam had done himself proud with mint juleps during the evening. He had insisted on making a special drink for Bessie, said it would take the swelling out of her nose. She had become very happy on it. She had been in good spirits to begin with.

I went to sleep.

I woke up suddenly. My blanket was on the floor, and I was kicking my feet, trying to swing myself out of bed and get up. Something was wrong around me, something, only a feeling, a feeling that something was about to happen. My watch said four thirty.

Outside, a bird was singing drowsily, twittering, thinking about getting up, probably. The morning was so still I could hear a truck shifting for the grade on the river road, a mile away.

As before, I put on a bathrobe and opened the hall door and stood there, listening. The clock was ticking downstairs. The house was wrapped in silence. Then a door slammed; someone ran through the house downstairs, pounded up the stairs, making a great deal of noise.

I stepped back into my room and closed the door. I took off my dressing gown and lay down on the bed.

I heard snatches of voices, loud and excited.

My door flew open. Marge ran in and bent over me. She grabbed my shoulder with both hands and shook it.

"Barney! Barney, wake up, wake up!"

I sat up.

"The house is on fire!" Marge said

wildly. "We've got to get out! We can't stop it! Do you understand me?" She shook me frantically. "Fire, Barney! Get up!"

I got to my feet and threw the bathrobe over my shoulders. "Sam," I said.

"He's getting Bessie. Hurry, Barney!" She dragged me toward the door. "It's out of control. Oh, it's lucky Sam happened to wake up. We'd all have been caught in it."

"Where is it?"

"Downstairs. Can't you hear it?" We were in the hall. We were starting down the stairs, hurrying. I could hear the fire. I could smell it. I could see the flickering glow, some place downstairs. I could smell the kerosene in it. I could tell from the sound, the dull, hollow roar, that it was burning furiously.

We reached the living room. Marge was clutching my hand, running ahead of me.

I stopped. "Go on out," I said. I had to yell to be heard above the fire. "I'll be out in a minute."

"No, no!" She pulled at my hand.

I jerked my hand free and pushed her toward the front door. It was open. Sam and Bessie were evidently already out. She stumbled out, and I saw Sam appear, sprinting through the flamelit shadows of the lawn, and grab her by the arms and drag her on away from the house.

The smoke was thickening. I got back through the kitchen to the basement door. Some freak of draft was keeping the smoke near the floor. It rolled in black, oily clouds around my knees.

The basement door was open. Fire was leaping beyond it. I edged to it. Sheets of vermilion flame licked up the steps, fell back. Flat ribbons of black smoke mingled with them, swept apart raggedly, joined now

and again, poured out the door around me. The heat rose and fell away and rose again. My hands were covering my face; I was trying to see through spread fingers; my eyes burned intolerably. I looked down into the basement.

Bessie Smith lay on the floor, near the fuel-oil tanks. She seemed to be sleeping. One arm was across her face. The fire had not yet reached her.

I soaked my bathrobe at the kitchen sink, wadded it around my head, and jumped down the basement stairs, through one heartbeat of enveloping, searing heat. I fell when I hit the cement floor, rolled clear of the flames.

A path was open to the broken basement window. With my bathrobe wrapped around my hand, I knocked out the jagged slivers of glass left around the pane. Then I tried to boost Bessie Smith through. She was limp, a dead weight. I couldn't do it.

I crawled through myself. The coolness of the grass outside numbed my skin. I turned and reached back through the window. I managed to wrap one hand in Bessie Smith's black hair.

I worked myself backward, dragging her up. I got a grip under her arm with my other hand and lifted her through the window. Half carrying her, I kept on going, away from the house, until I reached the other end of the tennis court, a few lawn chairs set at the edge of the woods. I lowered her into one of them.

Her pulse was strong. There were no marks on her head, except for her nose, still a little swollen. I rolled back her eyelid and, in the glare from the fire, I saw the pupil, dilated and void of reaction. I thought that meant she'd been drugged. I remem-

bered the special drink Sam had made for her.

I left her in the chair and went back to the house. Her green pajamas blended with the background of firelit pine and made her invisible from a few feet away. I looked back once and wondered if she was really there. I felt lightheaded. Singed hair made my skin crawl.

A small knot of people was gathered in the drive, watching the fire. Sam broke away from it and ran to me.

"Thank God, you got out!" he said. "Marge told me you'd gone back for something."

"Where is she?"

He indicated the people. "Some neighbors are taking care of her. They're getting her a blanket. She came out without even a robe."

"Where's Bessie?"

"Some place around. I've been trying to find her. I expect she thought of running down to the village to get help. She was too excited to know what she was doing."

"Are you sure she got out?"

He stared at me. "Of course, she did." He added, "Good Lord! You don't suppose she went back for something, too, and got caught in there—"

"I know damned well she did," I said.

His jaw dropped. He looked horrified. He spun toward the house, and shouted, "Then let's get her! What the hell are you standing—"

I grabbed him and held him.

"There's no use to get her," I said. "She's done for."

He swallowed. His eyes were wide, the whites showing all around the pupils. "You saw her?"

"I saw her."

"She's . . . she was in the fire?"

I started him walking with me, toward the tennis courts. Cars were

racing up the hill from the village—the volunteer fire department coming up to help watch the fire burn.

I said, "I want to talk to you, Sam."

He pulled away from me and stopped. "What do you mean?"

I said, "I want to know why you set that fire."

"Why, I— You're crazy! I didn't set—"

"I saw you."

His face was white. He stared at me, breathing hard. He said, huskily, "I knew someone was watching me. I could feel it."

"Come on away from the house," I said. "They can see us talking in the light." The fire was all over the lower floor of the house by this time. Flames puffed out the windows, sucked back, puffed out again.

Sam grabbed my arm. His fingers were trembling. "You've got to know, Barney. I had to do it. I had to do it!"

"She was blackmailing you," I said.

"She made me do it," he repeated desperately. "There was no other way. Everyone thinks I'm rich. My money's in trust. I couldn't get any sum like that, without telling what it was for. There was nothing else to do!" He stopped again, his face agitated, waving an arm while he spoke: "It was her own fault, Barney! She forced me to it!" He broke off, shocked, as he realized what he was saying.

"She came to blackmail you," I repeated.

He drew a deep, shuddering breath. He nodded his head. "She used to be a waitress in Boston. When I was in college. One time, I was drunk; there was an accident; she was hurt. I think my family paid some of her hospital expenses.

I never saw her again until this summer.

"She came up here and showed me a marriage license. She said we'd been married that night, before the accident. My God, man, I was too drunk to know—"

"And she wanted dough."

"She wanted thousands! She wanted an incredible amount! I tried to tell her it was impossible. She threatened to tell my family. Don't you understand? It made me guilty of bigamy. Marge—"

"You told her about it."

"I had to tell someone. She'd know what to do. She knows my family; she knows how they reacted to our marriage, let alone to . . . to something like this! It would ruin me, Barney. Ruin me, flatly! For good!"

"Marge told you what? To pay her?"

"She told me at first to let the damned—to let Bessie go ahead and tell it. To face it out. She didn't realize how impossible that was. She said she didn't mind for herself, but she . . . she has no family. I had to make her see that the family controls my money, controls my future, everything. Above all, they couldn't know about it.

"There was only one way to get any sum of money. We'd just built this house. We had the insurance on it. There's that damned local fable about a fire-drake. I got Marge to agree that that was the thing to do."

"You also got her to agree to pass Bessie off as an old school friend when I came up," I said. "Why didn't you call her your cousin?"

"I thought of that. Marge didn't want you to come up. But I thought it would be better. I thought, you and your ghosts—I thought that would be better. I couldn't call her

my cousin. I was afraid that might not look right. She doesn't look like a cousin."

"Didn't," I said.

His face was slick with perspiration. His eyes gleamed at me.

"How much would you get from burning the house?" I asked.

"Fifteen thousand. That would have satisfied her, for a while at least."

"But she'd always have been coming back for more," I said. We had reached the group of lawn chairs beyond the tennis court. I stood in front of Bessie Smith.

"Yes. Yes. She'd have wanted more forever. I knew that. I—"

"So you decided to murder her. Just a murder of convenience, eh?"

"So I—" His mouth worked. He said thickly, "No. No!"

"Did Marge know about that part of it?"

"No!" He was yelling. "No, I didn't! I swear I didn't!"

"Unwind," I said. "You don't know what you're saying. Sit down." I stepped away from the chair.

He dropped into it, his hands rubbing over his face. His arms flew out, and he leaped to his feet and looked down at the chair, holding his arms out stiff from his sides. Then

his hands swept around, and he lunged at Bessie Smith in the chair, and I grabbed him.

He was screaming. I dragged him back a dozen feet. I got a hand over his mouth.

I said, "They'll hear you out there."

He made unintelligible, gasping sounds. He gestured toward the chairs.

"It's Bessie," I said. "You tried to kill her. I wanted to be sure."

His face turned to me, and I repeated it.

"She's not dead," he said at last, whispering, looking at me blankly. Spasms of trembling passed over him.

"No," I said, "she's not dead. Unless that stuff you gave her will kill her."

"No." He was silent for a while. Then he said, in a choked voice: "It's like a miracle. A miracle. I didn't kill her."

"Not for want of trying," I said.

"I've been out of my head! I didn't know what I was doing! I've been going crazy, I tell you! Yesterday, down in the woods, she demanded the money again, told me to hurry. I lost my mind. I hit her. I wanted to kill her then. She laughed at me. I realized what it would be. She'd



be hanging on me forever! I'd never be rid of her! And then I thought of the fire, and if she should happen to be caught in it, and I . . . I didn't stop to think. I didn't let myself think. I didn't know what it would be like to be a murderer—until I saw her just then and thought . . . and thought—" His voice dried up in his throat.

He said, presently, "Barney. You won't tell Marge?"

"Why the hell shouldn't I?"

"I was forced to do it, Barney! I was driven to it! You might have done it—anyone! If she knew—if she knows—she'll leave me!"

"So you want me to be noble," I said. "You want me to say I'm thinking of her happiness. You want me to say I know she loves you, so I won't spoil it for her."

"She'll leave me," he said again.

"What the devil do you deserve?" I said. I heard a sound and sprang around, and saw Marge standing a few feet away, a blanket hanging from her shoulders, dragging the ground.

She came toward me blindly.

"Did you hear us?" I asked.

Her head nodded. Her red-gold hair fell over one cheek. She looked tiny, lost in the folds of the blanket.

"So you're through with him," I said.

"You know better than that, Barney. He needs me. If he wants me." We were talking as though we were alone. Her voice was low and flat and beaten.

"All right, tell him so," I said.

She reached for me, a small hand coming out of the blanket. "Barney."

I walked away.

A skeleton of the house remained, glowing in the midst of a sea of flames. While I watched, a beam crashed down and a fountain of sparks splashed up into the night, and the flames danced madly on it. I stood there a long time watching it.

Marge appeared beside me. "He didn't want me," she said.

I looked at her, and then looked around for Sam. "What are you talking about?"

"I meant that I'd stay with him on one condition. If he'd tell his family about . . . about her. He said . . . he said I was making him choose between his family and me."

She stood close to me, her head down, not looking at me.

"I said, 'Yes.' He said . . . he said I didn't love him." She picked at the scorched lapels of my dressing gown.

My hands felt her shoulders through the folds of the blanket.

I said, "He chose his family."

She didn't look up. "I thought he would, Barney. I've . . . I've understood Sam for a long time."

She began to cry. I put my arms around her and held her close against me.

I could have sworn that the fire had formed a face, and that the face was laughing.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

THE END.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

A DROP OF BLOOD

by DALE CLARK

*An honest cop like Harrigan didn't
want glory at the expense of justice.*

I.

"Gentlemen of the jury, have you reached your verdict?"

"Your honor, we have. We find the defendant, Charles Fox, guilty, as charged, of murder in the first degree."

Charles Fox, a thin, gray, shifty-eyed prisoner, leaped like wild and tore free from the two uniformed officers.

He took them by surprise. He surprised everybody, in fact. Alec Harrigan, in the front row of spectators, was as startled as the next man—and Harrigan knew Charles Fox pretty well. Very well, you might say.

For it was Harrigan who had arrested the prisoner, Harrigan who uncovered the clues and, finally, Harrigan who served as the State's main witness against the man.

But he hadn't expected any such move as this from Charles Fox. Because Fox wasn't the type that went in for physical action at all. Quite

the contrary. Fox was a mental sort, a morbid sort. A brooder and schemer and hatcher of plots. You might call him the watching-and-waiting type; a man who lurked rather than leaped.

So the evidence proved, and so he had seemed throughout the trial. Calm, collected, cold. Never turning one carefully combed hair on his narrow skull; never lifting his oily, cocksure voice by one single note.

Well, he lifted it now. He shrieked, screamed, sobbed:

"All right! Blame me! Send me to the chair! But you've got the wrong man, do you hear?"

He was running, butting and clawing his way through the astonished knot of lawyers—his own attorneys and the district attorney's staff—until he reached the courtroom railing.

There he stopped. For he wasn't trying to escape. No, not a bit of it.

"You, Harrigan!" he shrilled. "You listen to me!"

Charles Fox looked insane, ber-

serk. He bent far over the railing to shake a skinny forefinger at Harrigan, and the mousy gray hair fell stringily down his pale, twisted face. Eyeglasses tilted askew on the fleshless ridge of his nose, thin gray lips writhing snakily, Charles Fox shrieked out his litany of hate.

"You've done it again, haven't you, Harrigan? You—the hard cop that always gets his man! You—the smart cop, twisting a few threads of suspicion into a rope around my neck—"

But he didn't have time for all this. The white-haired judge was pounding for order, the big blue-clad officers already bursting their path through the lawyers.

"You've won again, Harrigan! That's what you think! You've got your verdict, the case is closed, and I'll soon be de—"

They had him, an officer on each side. He hung onto the railing, though, with all the strength of both skinny hands. He struggled and twisted and panted forth the rest in a cracked crescendo of taunting passion.

"Your mistake, Harrigan! Because you picked the wrong man! You let the real killer go free, Harrigan—scot-free—and he's laughing at you—"

The unequal struggle ended. They hauled him away. He went suddenly limp, his knees wilted, he sagged against the officers for support.

"Order!" the white-haired judge commanded. "Well, counselor?"

One man had kept his head during this scene. It was a large, handsome, monumental-appearing head, fitted onto the well-clad, impressive shoulders of Fox's chief counsel, Horace Sibley.

"Your honor," cried Sibley, "and may it please the court, I must ques-

tion the verdict and demand that the jury be polled individually."

"Objection!" gasped red-haired Jeff Delford from the huddle of assistant district attorneys.

"You can't object. We have a right to poll the jury. It's the law."

"Your honor! They deliberately staged this disgraceful uproar! It's been nothing but an act to bamboozle some weak-minded juror into changing his ballot!"

"Your honor! I object! The prosecution is slandering my client, myself, and the intelligence of these twelve public-spirited gentlemen, in its insane thirst for the blood of an innocent man."

They polled the jury. Thusly: "Grant Steven Lord, how say you?"

"Guilty."

"James Beckwith, how say you?" "Guilty."

But the seventh and the ninth jurors now answered, "Not guilty."

So his honor instructed the twelve men to retire and try again to agree upon a verdict. "You will not be influenced by the defendant's unseemly outburst, nor by the remarks of counsel. You will find your verdict on the sworn evidence, and on no other basis whatsoever."

Exactly. The jury would forget this scene. Make believe it hadn't happened at all. But could they?

Sergeant Harrigan lumbered across the criminal courts building hallway, into a suite of rooms reserved for the district attorney's staff. Jeff Delford's office was empty at the moment. Harrigan went to a scarred rolltop desk in the corner, opened an upper drawer, removed a small, japanned metal box.

He did not look very much like a human bloodhound as he pulled up

Continued on page 141

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A T A L L N E W S S T A N D S

Continued from page 138

a swivel chair, sat down heavily, unlatched his box, and proceeded to eat his lunch. But as he chewed there were intervals when the rhythmic bunching of jaw muscles relaxed altogether, and he sat staring into space.

Sergeant Harrigan was really a very old-fashioned cop. Plain as an old shoe. Crusty as home-baked bread. Turning gray-haired, having a son in college and a daughter in high school, he possessed about as much glamour as a nightstick.

Nightsticks are hard; so was Harrigan. That is, he had old-fashioned ideas on the subject of doing his duty.

He was stubborn and tireless and so grimly persistent that he frequently worked eighteen-hour days on a case. Quite often, Harrigan's suspects failed to appreciate this kind of old-fashioned industry. They figured he didn't have to work that hard, that he must be driven by some bitter, soured, personal animus. Harrigan had it in for them, they thought. Or, like Charles Fox, they pictured him as a merciless man hunter who gloated with glee every time he provided a fresh victim for the chair.

Which wasn't so at all. Harrigan did his duty as he saw it, that was all.

And he did not want to send an innocent man to the chair. For honesty is an old-fashioned virtue, too.

Harrigan was an honest cop.

Had Charles Fox been acting to impress the jury? Was Fox capable of playing so skillful a scene?

As he puzzled, the office door opened. It was the red-headed assistant district attorney, accompanied by the slender brunette, a girl who had been a witness for the

State during Charles Fox's trial.

Her name was Jewel Worth, and the murder victim had been her employer.

"Well," she asked, "what happens now?"

Young Jeff Delford obviously took more than a purely official interest in this girl. He made quite a gallant show of placing a chair for her beside his own desk.

"It means a split jury, of course," he said. "Those two fellows will never change their minds, after committing themselves to 'not guilty' in a public poll."

"Does that mean Fox goes free?"

"No. There'll be a new trial."

Jewel Worth shuddered. "How ghastly!"

Sergeant Harrigan had taken an apple from his lunch box. As he quartered it with his penknife, he shot a shrewd gray glance at the girl.

"Hm-m-m. It sounds like you don't want to go on the witness stand again."

"Of course I don't. Telling that whole story again and being torn to pieces by Sibley—"

Delford smiled. "You weren't torn to pieces, and Sibley couldn't shake your story one iota. You're a fine, brave girl, Miss Worth. I was proud of the way you stood up under cross-examination."

She had been J. F. Crayton's private secretary. But since Crayton had been an invalid, this meant she was virtually a member of the family. She had lived with them in the big house on Dexter Avenue.

The questions which Horace Sibley had hurled at her during the cross-examination had been questions about the Crayton family.

About Ethel, J. F.'s plump, pretty and extremely self-centered wife.

About the brother-in-law, Lucas Beale. A man whose profession was

that of living off his relatives.

And the boy, Mervyn, who was J. F.'s son by a first marriage. A strange, dour, sullen fifteen-year-old.

Sibley had asked these questions, naturally, to bring out that the wife or the brother-in-law or even the boy might well have had the motive and opportunity to kill J. F. Crayton.

Harrigan's stare probed keenly into Jewel Worth's distressed expression. She meant what she said. She didn't want to go on the witness stand again. Indeed, she was plainly terrified by the prospect of that ordeal.

"Miss Worth," he rumbled, "just exactly which one of Sibley's questions bothered you the most?"

"It was about Mervyn—" She broke off abruptly.

"The kid. Why?"

The girl flushed. "I was afraid he knew that Mervyn once slashed his tutor with a pocketknife."

The red-headed assistant district attorney uttered a startled exclamation.

And Harrigan opened his eyes widely at the girl.

"Don't misunderstand," said Jewel Worth quickly. "Mervyn's no prize package. He's really a nasty little brat, and I think in one of his raging tantrums he might easily stab someone fatally. But not his father. If he'd killed, it would have been Ethel, his stepmother."

II.

Harrigan said to the squad-car driver, "Twelve South Dexter Avenue."

The machine rolled. Harrigan leaned back against the cushions, lighted a five-cent cigar, and proceeded to reconsider the case against Charles Fox.

What was this case?

Imagine Fox, that thin, gray, shifty-eyed individual, in the shabby downtown office where he had transacted his business these past dozen years. He is in real estate, a manager of rental properties. The properties are mostly like his office: shabby, down at the heel, neglected. His listing includes an apartment building, a cheap hotel, an undeveloped subdivision, and an abandoned warehouse—all owned by J. F. Crayton.

They are cat-and-dog propositions, all of them. They represent mistakes in J. F.'s financial career. The apartment building is something Crayton had to bid in, to protect his investment in a building-bond scheme that flopped. The hotel, too, is a foreclosure. The subdivision dates back to the Coolidge era. As for the warehouse, Crayton is only hanging onto it with the hope that the ground on which it stands may some day become valuable.

Charles Fox, as year follows year, realizes that these properties do not mean very much to J. F. Crayton. J. F. does not keep an eye on them at all. Indeed, how can he? He is a sick man to begin with; and also, continually, he is traveling to this, that and the other health resort. How unlikely it is, thinks Fox, that the invalid will ever go poking his nose inside that apartment building, or the cheap little hotel, either!

And if J. F. Crayton doesn't investigate, who will? Certainly not his plump, pretty, conceited wife! Or that lazy parasite, the brother-in-law. Or the queer, spoiled, vicious little boy.

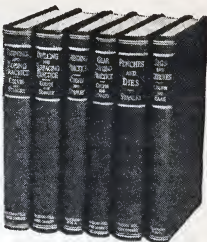
So, taking a long breath, Charles Fox hands in his annual statement on these matters. Ten of the apartment units, he says, have been rented at forty dollars each per month.

Continued on page 144

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Continued from page 142

Actually, the number of rented apartments totals fourteen. And Charles Fox, letting go his breath in a sigh of relief when J. F. Crayton barely glances at the statement, puts the difference into his pocket. One hundred and sixty dollars a month. Nearly two thousand dollars for the year.

It isn't bad. Making all that money by writing an "0" instead of a "4" on a piece of paper. Charles Fox smiles to himself, and turns his shifty eye toward the little hotel.

That is rented at a flat sum, so he can't repeat the same game exactly. But his quick, fertile, scheming mind invents variations. He pads the expenses. He simply goes to a printer and orders some letterheads struck off. Like a magician, he spirits a company of plumbers, plasterers, carpenters, roofers. Imaginary water pipes burst in the hotel basement, imaginary leaks trickle through the roof and bring down closet ceilings—things like that.

"I suppose the old fire trap is falling to pieces," says J. F. Crayton.

Charles Fox nods, and tucks another five hundred dollars into his pocket.

The warehouse is next. And this is a stroke of business, the biggest yet. Charles Fox encounters a manufacturer who needs storage space, and he rents the warehouse at the rate of four hundred dollars per month. Almost five thousand dollars a year. And the warehouse will not really be opened, it will be used just for storage; nobody driving casually past would guess that the building was in use at all.

Besides, J. F. Crayton and all his family are in distant Tucson, Arizona.

Charles Fox cannot make up his mind to do anything with that four hundred dollars a month except put it in his pocket. It becomes eight,

twelve, sixteen hundred. The time comes to submit his annual statement, and he does not mention the warehouse rent at all.

Then the blow falls.

For Fox, wise and gray and shifty though he is, has made the essential mistake which criminals always make. It is the mistake of an egotist who can see only one side of a set of facts—his own side. He never guesses that the blade has two edges, that it can cut both ways.

J. F. Crayton is a sick man, remember. He has a plump, pretty and utterly selfish wife. He has an indolent parasite for a brother-in-law; and he has a strange, sadistic young savage of a son who will probably end his days in a private asylum—if not a public penitentiary.

Crayton sees just one logical solution to such a set-up. He returns home. He consults with his lawyers and his investment banker. Incidentally, almost as an afterthought, he picks up the phone and speaks to Charles Fox.

At the other end of the wire, Fox bursts into perspiration as he listens to the decision. It is a bombshell. It is the end. For Crayton has decided to close out his various interests; to put every cent into a trust fund where neither the wife nor the brother-in-law can mismanage it after his death. And where the son can't mismanage it.

And it is a bombshell without even a delayed fuse to it. "About the warehouse," says Crayton, "I've already got an offer for that." Another client of the investment banker wants to buy, tear down the old building, and turn the site into a parking lot.

Away rushes Fox to his manufacturer—since obviously the building must be vacated at once. But the manufacturer shrugs, points to his

lease; the lease is for a year, and he refuses to vacate. To offers of five, six hundred dollars a month if he will only get out, the man shakes his head. It will cost him more than that to move his goods out of the building.

Besides, the manufacturer does not like the color of Fox's face or Fox's excited manner; in short, he seems to smell a rat. He begins to ask some pointed questions. And Charles Fox, unable to answer the questions, shrinks away to his shabby downtown office.

He is in a horrible predicament. The best he can do is tell J. F. Crayton the truth and offer to make good his embezzlement. But if he does that, there is bound to be a general audit of his affairs. Fox figures up. In all, in round figures, he owes Crayton nearly ten thousand dollars.

And even then, supposing he does pay, Crayton may send him to the penitentiary.

Gray, sick-faced, he picks up his phone and arranges a meeting with Crayton that evening. For eight o'clock.

Then he goes out, steps into a department store, and purchases a straight-edged razor. The clerk does not sell many such razors in a day—or a week, for that matter. He notices Charles Fox for this reason, and further because of the awkward manner in which Fox opens the razor to examine it. Men who are accustomed to shaving themselves with such a weapon generally open a new one in a special way, to test its weight and "feel." But Fox handles the razor as if he intended to carve a roast with it.

He goes on, to the information-service booth at the public library. He asks the attendant for a blood-stain solvent. His wife, says Fox,

has had the misfortune to break a dinner glass, cut her hand, and thus stain a particularly fragile dress which she is afraid to intrust to a commercial cleaner.

It makes a difference what material the stain is in, so the attendant inquires. Fox replies, wool. The attendant cannot imagine a woolen garment being that fragile—which serves to fix Fox in her mind.

He keeps his appointment with Crayton, but he does not stay long. It is twenty minutes after eight when he returns to the front door, and the maid hands him his hat and coat.

It is ten o'clock when Jewel Worth finds her employer dead. His throat slashed, he sprawls in his wheel chair with the typewritten suicide note folded in the pocket of his smoking jacket.

But the note is not signed.

And the wound seems too deep to have been self-inflicted with the safety-razor blade that lies on the floor under his hand.

So the police called upon Charles Fox. He fared very well in that first interview.

Next time they called, it was to put him under arrest.

For Sergeant Harrigan, as he plodded patiently through all the mass of the victim's papers, had run onto a plumber's bill. And there was no such plumber. The address on the letterhead was that of a vacant lot. The next day, plain-clothes men were visiting the city's print shops with photostats of that letterhead.

By that time Charles Fox was already behind bars. Harrigan had discovered a washed-out bloodstain in the suspect's right-hand trouser pocket, as if some blood-wet object had been carried there.

The manufacturer, when he had

seen the newspaper headlines and photographs, came forward with his story. As did the clerk and the library attendant.

That was the case against Charles Fox, and it was almost the blueprint of a perfect piece of deduction. There was motive in it, since Crayton's death threw his property into probate, where it could not be sold immediately. There was opportunity and intention. Harrigan had really been very well satisfied with the case.

But now he wasn't so sure.

He knew how it is with criminals like Fox; he had watched too many of them lie and squirm and shed crocodile tears. How noble they were—to hear them tell it! How heroic, and misunderstood! And how much the innocent victim of other men's schemes!

For that was Charles Fox's defense, of course. He had falsified those annual statements—he had to admit it—but J. F. Crayton had told him to, because Crayton wanted to cut corners on his tax returns. He had paid Crayton the full amount, in cash instead of by check. It was Crayton who had sent him to the manufacturer, to talk the man out of his rights.

All Crayton's fault, you see!

And as for the razor, he had never bought one. He was the victim of a promotion-hunting sales clerk, and of a library attendant who wanted to see her name in the papers.

The bloodstain in his pocket? Why, Harrigan must have put it there!

All other people's fault! He, Charles Fox, was utterly innocent. That was the role he tried to play—misunderstood, honest, persecuted victim.

"The real killer is laughing at you—laughing!"

Perhaps Charles Fox, for the first time during his trial, had told the truth, Harrigan mused, as the police car pulled up in front of No. 12 South Dexter Avenue.

III.

"The terrace. O. K., never mind announcing me," growled Harrigan to the white-aproned maid who opened the massive front door.

He plodded the length of the baronial hall. This was a magnificent but not a pleasant or a friendly house. It was a place of twenty-foot-high beamed ceilings and tiny, cheerless windows.

Harrigan barged out onto the sunlit terrace, into a different world. The terrace was an expanse of cream-colored brick, spotted with the brilliant maroon-and-green of modernistic deck furniture.

Lucas Beale, in a dressing gown, sat under a striped umbrella toying with breakfast laid out on a glass-topped table.

Yes, breakfast. For Lucas never got up before noon. And he had never in his life done one day's work. He sagged with idle fat.

"Hallo, Harrigan," said he. "Miss Worth just telephoned the news to Ethel. A new trial, huh? What a damned nuisance!"

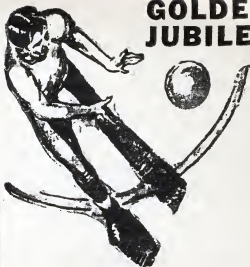
Ethel lolled in a rattan lounge chair, clad only in a scanty beach costume. As Harrigan's footfalls neared, she lazily adjusted a robe over her opulent curves.

"I suppose now we can't leave next week," she said crossly. "I need a vacation, after all I've been through. The publicity and everything."

You would never have guessed that only a few miles away, a man was on trial for the murder of her husband. But then, Ethel had avoided the trial as much as she could. And Lucas, too.

She turned her head on the padded
DS—10C

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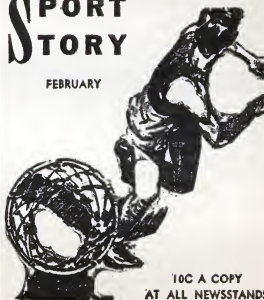
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cushion of the lounge chair to stare at Harrigan. Her eyes were greenish, with exotically long, curling lashes. She was much younger than Lucas. And she had kept herself in much better shape.

"What's the matter, anyway?" she asked. "I thought the police were sure Fox did it. I thought that was all settled."

Harrigan shrugged. "The jury doesn't seem to be so sure."

He was remembering that, while Lucas had taken Mervyn to a movie on the night of the murder, Ethel had been here in the house. With a splitting headache, she claimed.

Lucas scraped his chair back on the bricks. "Well, we're stuck. There's nothing we can do about it."

"Except see to it that we have an even stronger case next time we go to bat," said Harrigan.

"Oh, sure."

"I thought I'd go through J. F.'s papers once more. Just to make sure we're not missing any bets."

"Go ahead," yawned Lucas. "I'd help, only I'm a bit under the weather today. Stomach condition. Have to lie down for an hour after meals—doctor's orders."

Harrigan went into the house, but not into the study where J. F. had kept his business files. He turned and climbed the stairs to the second-floor hallway. Voices met him even before he reached the door.

"I'll have to report this to your mother, Mervyn!"

"My what?"

"Your mother, young man."

There was a loud trumpet of lip noise.

"Mervyn!"

"That for old Ethel. Phooey on her."

Sergeant Harrigan opened the door.

This was the schoolroom. Book-

cases shelved along the wall to join a section of blackboard. There was a suspended globe, a dictionary stand and two desks.

Jim Sutler, the pale young tutor, stood at the blackboarded end of the room, gripping a wooden pointer so tightly that his knuckles shone white.

His pupil sprawled behind a desk, legs outstretched, thumbs hooked in his pantaloons pockets—the picture of juvenile contempt.

Neither of them noticed Harrigan in the doorway.

"Mervyn," Jim Sutler was saying desperately, "I shan't allow you to speak that way of your mother—"

"Stepmother!"

"—and if it happens again, I'll report it to her."

"You don't dare. She'd send me to reform school, and you'd lose your job. So phooey for you, Sutler!"

"Mr. Sutler, and don't say phooey!"

The boy had a body too small for his age, and a face too wizened and old for his fifteen years. But he moved like a flash. Dipped his pen into the desk inkwell, flicked it, threw the globule of wet black.

Ink splattered itself across the tutor's pale features.

"Yah. You dassn't tattle-tell!"

Harrigan erupted, "Why, you ornery little cuss!"

The boy sprang up, whirled. His bright, beady eyes blinked and focused behind thick-lensed spectacles. He seemed to forget his quarrel with Sutler instantly.

"Hey, it's the sarge! Say, is the guy guilty? Is he going to the chair? Gee, do you suppose they'll let me watch when he fries?"

"Mervyn!" choked the tutor.

"Well, Uncle Luke's going to see it. He told me he was."

"Mervyn, you go straight down-

stairs to your mother. Tell her you threw ink at me. And wait for me there."

"Phooey!"

Harrigan walked into the schoolroom. "Beat it, kid."

The boy looked at Harrigan a moment. Then he decided to go, making a careful circle wide of Harrigan's reach. Just like a half-wild young animal.

"Excuse me," said Jim Sutler, shakily dabbing at the ink on his cheek. He opened a door at the end of the schoolroom, and vanished from sight. Through the closed door, Harrigan could hear tap water spurting into a lavatory basin.

He stepped over and stared at the books on Mervyn's desk. Arithmetic, geography, seventh reader. Harrigan picked up a grubby, pencil-tracked piece of paper, a problem in decimals.

The sergeant shook his head. His daughter, the one in high school, was fifteen. And she brought home problems in algebra that Harrigan himself couldn't work.

However, no kid of Harrigan's went around phooey-ing people or throwing ink at the teacher.

Sutler came out presently, drying his face with a towel. "Mervyn's a problem," he said apologetically. "No private school in the country will take him."

"Yeah. I hear he pulled a knife on you once."

The tutor stared. Swallowed. Shook his head undecidedly.

"I heard it from a good, reliable source," said Harrigan.

Sutler turned up his sleeve then. He showed Harrigan the scar on his forearm. It was four inches long, and ugly.

Harrigan felt a quick pulse jump

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in his throat as he looked. "How did it happen?"

"I ordered him to study instead of going for a ride with J. F. That was in Tucson. He had one of those fancy knives from an Indian trader. He whipped it out and came at me."

Harrigan's gaze gleamed thoughtfully. "How did the sight of blood affect the kid, Sutler? Did he draw back, or—"

"I don't think he was even aware of the blood," the tutor said bitterly. "You've only seen him in a disagreeable mood. In a tantrum, in a rage, he's simply blind and beside himself with fury."

"Hm-m-m. How was he punished for it?"

"He wasn't. You couldn't punish him without J. F.'s knowing it, and J. F.'s health was so bad no one dared risk the shock of telling him about the affair."

They looked at each other.

"But that's all over now," Jim Sutler said. "Ethel won't prove a model mother. Far from it. But she won't let any schoolboy tramp on her, either—even if she has to lock him away in an institution."

"She's considered doing that?"

Sutler nodded.

Harrigan shot forth, "Where does Uncle Luke fit into the picture?"

"Lucas?" The tutor smiled wryly.

"In six years the boy will inherit two-thirds of several million dollars. Can't you imagine where Lucas Beale would be in such a picture?"

"He plays up to the kid?"

"Of course he does. He eggs him on. I'm sure of it."

Sergeant Harrigan made sounds of disgust. Harrigan had old-fashioned ideas about family life, among other things. He believed that kids ought to respect their elders; and also that the elders ought to behave so kids could respect them.

He thought of the selfish, vain stepmother; the lazy parasite of a brother-in-law; the tutor, too

weak to handle the boy and lacking the backbone to get out and hustle himself another job.

"Tell me—how does Mervyn get on with Miss Worth?"

"That's a funny thing. He minds his p's and q's where she's concerned."

"I thought so," Harrigan said.

For Jewel Worth seemed to him the one really decent and likable person in the whole menagerie.

The long arm of coincidence reached itself. As Harrigan thought of the girl, he heard her scream.

Young Sutler ran and threw up the schoolroom window.

"Oh, God!" he choked.

Sergeant Harrigan thrust him aside. He bent his broad shoulders over the sill and stared down at the sunlit terrace.

There stood Jewel Worth, transfixed with horror, her hand clasped to her throat.

And there lay Ethel, full length and face down, as if she had turned over to toast her back awhile. Her robe fluttered, brushed lightly against the house wall by the faint breath of breeze. Her blond head was still cradled in the crook of a plump, bare arm. She hadn't looked up, or made a move to defend herself.

The blood was a very bright crimson soaking the bra top of her beach costume.

"S-stabbed!" rattled Jim Sutler at Harrigan's side.

Straight to the heart, thought Harrigan. There'd been no outcry, no struggle, nothing but the stealthy approach and the one deadly, accurate blow. Just as someone had tiptoed up behind J. F.'s wheel chair and killed the invalid with one swift, slashing stroke.

"Mervyn!" gasped the tutor. "Where's that kid gone to?"

IV.

Mervyn was gone, no doubt of that. Jewel Worth had seen him go as she came up the front walk after dismissing her taxicab. He'd been running across the side lawn, and as she called out to him, he'd thrown one frantic glance over his shoulder and then raced on to wriggle out of sight through the hedge.

Harrigan stood on the terrace and stared bleakly at a drop of blood on the white brick. A drop that looked like a tiny crimson star.

"Just what happened before," declared Sutler grimly. "He ran away that time, too. He hid his blood-stained clothes and the knife, and afterward denied his guilt, even to my face."

Jewel Worth said, thin-voiced: "But he's so young—and we don't know for sure. Nobody actually saw Mervyn do this. Why can't we give him the benefit of a tiny doubt, at least?"

Sergeant Harrigan's gray eyes stayed as if fascinated on the many-pointed little star of blood.

"Perhaps"—the girl hesitated—"it isn't as simple as it looks. Ethel may have been killed by the same person who murdered J. F. And we know positively Mervyn couldn't have done that."

Jim Sutler exploded, "Oh, yes, he could!"

Harrigan's head jerked up; he turned and peered glumly at the pale young tutor.

"How's that? What do you mean, he could have?"

Sutler moistened his lips. "Surely you noticed his glasses. The boy's short-sighted. He likes to sit close to the screen at a movie. Not farther back than the first dozen rows." His brows hardened into a furrow. "I'll bet anything they didn't sit to-

gether. That Mervyn was up toward the front, and Lucas somewhere back toward the middle of the theater."

Harrigan gasped. As a matter of fact, moment by moment he had been becoming increasingly sure that it was not Charles Fox who had committed that first murder. *Planned* to, yes. But hadn't.

And also, moment by moment, Harrigan had grown more certain that fifteen-year-old Mervyn was the key to the riddle.

"I know I should have mentioned this before," Sutler said gravely. "But, right from the start, everything pointed so completely to Fox. You see my position as an employee here. It wasn't my place to drag out a lot of dirty family linen that didn't seem to belong in the wash, anyway."

"Take over here," snapped Harrigan to the blue-coated squad-car officer. "Don't let anything be touched until the headquarters men come. Now, where the devil is Lucas?"

"He usually retires to his room and lies down after meals," Jewel Worth said.

A frightened maid joined in; she had seen Lucas going upstairs when she came to clear the breakfast dishes off the terrace table.

And Ethel had been alive then, had told the maid not to make so much noise.

"Hm-m-m. Well, Miss Worth, come along."

Harrigan led the way into the study, the room in which J. F. Crayton had been murdered. He spoke briefly over its telephone to police headquarters, ordering a dragnet set for the fifteen-year-old. "And shoot a wire to the police in Tucson, Arizona, have them locate the physician who treated James Sutler's arm wound last winter. Another thing, I

want Charles Fox brought out here."

Headquarters said something.

"I know he's in the custody of the court," Harrigan growled. "But I need him worse than the court does. A lot worse."

He turned to the brunet girl.

"Now," he said, "exactly what were the terms of J. F.'s will and trust fund?"

Jewel Worth looked at him in surprise. "Why, you know. Ethel was to get the income until Mervyn became twenty-one—"

"Yeah. But I want the wording, the exact way it goes."

The girl crossed the room. She twisted the combination of a wall vault, pulled open the circular door. Untying the ribbon from a bundle of papers she said, "Here's a copy of the will—the executor has the original, of course. It specifies that Ethel is to receive the income from the estate until Mervyn is legally competent to administer same."

"Legally competent," Harrigan repeated.

"Yes. Which he won't be until he's twenty-one. After that, he's to pay—he was to pay—her a flat sum of three hundred dollars monthly."

"But if he died before then?"

"The estate would revert to a medical foundation, except for three hundred a month for Ethel during her lifetime."

"And her death means—"

"Her income from the estate stops, is all."

Harrigan said, "In plain language, it means J. F. didn't leave her a nickel of the principal. The principal couldn't be touched at all until Mervyn was legally competent to handle it. Otherwise, it all goes to charity."

The girl nodded.

Harrigan said, "And that will

dates back quite a ways, long before the trust fund was set up."

"1931. Which was years before he hired me," Jewel Worth said. "But the trust fund doesn't really change matters. It merely makes the estate easier to administer. Instead of being scattered property, stocks and bonds, it's all in one place."

Harrigan peered into space, thoughtfully.

Finally, he said, "I want you to sit down and make up a list of all the property which isn't in the trust fund. Then telephone the investment banker, the executor of the will, and compare your list with his. And keep the door locked while you do."

"Locked?" Her eyes widened. "But I don't understand at all. The only property outside the trust fund is this house and the real estate Fox was handling—"

"That's the property I mean," Harrigan said.

He paced out of the study. The frightened maid was showing the first detachment of headquarters men to the terrace. Harrigan halted her with, "Now. Where's Lucas Beale's room?"

She pointed vaguely toward the baroque chandelier over the stairs. "F-first d-door on your r-right."

Harrigan eyed the chandelier.

"What happens when one of those bulbs burns out?" he asked.

The maid gave him a nothing-registered stare.

"Never mind," sighed Harrigan.

He went up and opened the first door on the right without knocking. Lucas Beale was not lying down. He reclined regally in a cushion-padded easy-chair, fat fingers wrapped around a tall tumbler.

He hadn't heard Jewel Worth's scream, possibly, since his windows overlooked the lawn on the other side of the house. Or if he'd heard, he'd been too lazy to investigate.

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"Stomach medicine," said Lucas, making a quick face over the tumbler.

Harrigan grabbed the glass, lifted it, sniffed.

"Whiskey!"

Harrigan spoke contemptuously. For his old-fashioned ideas included a prejudice against solitary drinking. He'd never met a secret tippler yet who wasn't a confirmed dipsomaniac. And he didn't know any dipsos who weren't also ingrained liars.

Lucas Beale saw that he wasn't kidding anybody. His eyes hardened, and his loose lips assumed a curl of sulky bravado.

"So what?" he challenged. "Since when have my personal habits been the business of the police?"

Harrigan said, "Since I found out you didn't sit anywhere near Mervyn at that movie."

Lucas looked stunned. The color of jaundice yellowed his lardy cheeks. "You've been misinformed, Harrigan. We sat right beside each other. You can get Mervyn in here and ask him."

"I've already seen the kid."

"You're bluffing," the fat man said hostilely. "I know you saw him. He came in here and told me all about it. You saw him throw ink at Sutler, yes, but you didn't ask him any such question."

"So that's it. He ran to you, did he?"

Harrigan's tone bristled. He leveled his forefinger at the fat, sagging figure.

"You're not fooling me," said the sergeant bitterly. "I wasn't born yesterday. I'm a family man. I've got kids of my own. And I know what's been going on here. If you ask me, it stinks! It's so rotten it reeks to high heaven!"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" cried Lucas, paling now.

Harrigan said, "I'm pretty soon going to take time off and tell you."

He didn't take time now. He

swung on his heel, went out of there, up the hall to the schoolroom; through the schoolroom, opening the end door.

The next room had been fitted up as a kind of general science laboratory, with concrete vats and a table racked with test tubes. Apparently, Mervyn's scientific education hadn't progressed very far. The room had become a catchall for oddments of all kinds. The housemaids kept brooms, mops, dusting cloths in here. A wooden stick, twenty feet long, answered Harrigan's question; it had a metal clip on the end, and was used for reaching up and replacing burned-out bulbs in the stair chandelier.

That was only the beginning.

The room also held steamer trunks, suitcases, framed pictures that the family had grown tired of seeing, stacks of books no one wanted to read. Harrigan waded through the debris, opened another door.

Mervyn's room. Harrigan needed just one look around.

"Horses," he muttered.

Some kids collect stamps; this one collected horse pictures. Had them stuck up all around the walls. Had the autographed photo of a rodeo champion broncbuster pinned up over the head of the bed. A framed publicity still of a Western movie hero on his desk. But, mostly, just horse pictures.

Harrigan hurried downstairs.

"Somewhere around," he said to his squad-car driver, "there might be a riding academy?"

"Uh-huh. Parkway Stables, over on Sebastian Street."

"Let's go."

It wasn't a three-minute drive. Sebastian Street adjoined the park, and the park had bridle paths. For beginners, the stables had a practice ring back of the buildings. Harri-

gan told the bluecoat to park in the alley. He plodded across the tan-bark of the ring, fumbled to open the hasp of the stable's back door.

Inside, Harrigan strained his eyes into the shadowed gloom. There were smells of ammonia, hay, leather. He could hear the stomp of hoofs in the box stalls, the munching as the horses ate, and the voice of a hostler singing at some task up at the other end of the place. It sounded like a darky's voice.

Harrigan could not help a slow, nostalgic grin. Remembering, when he was a kid, how the livery stable had been a regular hang-out. Thirty years ago. Harrigan had no trouble at all remembering the likeliest place a boy would hit for and hide.

His eyes found it, cleated boards up the side of the wall making a ladder to the haymow. Harrigan tiptoed to the ladder and laid a hand on the worn, slick wooden rungs. He was not quite halfway up to the mow when the shrill whisper hissed down at him.

"You stop, sarge! Don't you try to catch me! I've got a gun, and I'll shoot you dead!"

V.

Harrigan tipped his head backward, leaning out from the ladder to look upward. The hole at the top of the ladder was maybe two feet square. It was very dark up in the mow, and the boy's eyes—magnified by the thick-lensed spectacles—glowed like amber coals.

He really had a gun, too. He held it gripped in both hands, the barrel braced over the edge of the hole, aimed squarely at Harrigan.

"No cop's going to fry me in any old 'lectric chair!" Mervyn announced hysterically. "I'll kill you, sarge, before I'm taken prisoner!"

Harrigan believed it. He knew that the fifteen-year-old, in a crazy funk of fear, was as deadly as any dope-filled hoodlum could possibly be.

Indeed, Harrigan would rather have faced a dope-filled adult. Then he would simply have jumped off the ladder, jerked out his own gun, and slammed a couple of well-placed shots into the inch boards overhead. But Harrigan had no idea of shooting a fifteen-year-old boy.

"Take it easy, son," he said. "There's lots more cops where I come from. You can't kill all of us, you know. You'll run out of ammunition, and then we're bound to catch you."

The eyes glittered. "I'm saving the last bullet for myself, sarge. It's better 'n being fried alive in the chair."

"Now, sonny, what do you know about the chair?"

"Uncle Luke told me!"

"I bet he did," said Harrigan grimly. "But he told you wrong. The law doesn't send young kids to the chair, and, anyway, I'm pretty sure you haven't committed any murders—yet."

"You're lying, sarge! Cops always lie to people. You're just as tricky as snakes!"

"According to Luke."

"You'd like to get me inside your old police station. So you could beat me up with rubber hoses and shine lights in my eyes until I said anything you wanted," gritted the boy.

Harrigan shook his head. It was going to be very hard to argue this lad into surrendering peacefully.

Harrigan, however, had had plenty of personal experience with kids.

He drew in his breath, and released it with a laugh.

"Mervyn, I'm glad to see you know what it's all about. It makes it easier

to explain why I really came here."

"Huh?" said Mervyn suspiciously.

"Well, all cops are crooks and grafters. Uncle Lucas explained that to you, didn't he?"

"Sure, but—"

"You're a rich boy, Mervyn. Now that your stepmother is dead, you're going to have oodles and oodles of money. And I want some of it."

"Sarge!"

"Yeah, Mervyn. That's why I came here alone. I've got a way figured out for you to escape—for a price. Listen," said Harrigan in a lowered voice, "isn't there some place where we can have a quiet talk?"

"Sure! I got a cave up here, back in the hay—"

Harrigan pushed head and shoulders up into the mow. His hand shot out. There was a muffled shriek of dismay. And then, sobs!

"I didn't do it, sarge! I didn't kill her!"

Harrigan pocketed the weapon and said, "I figured you didn't. A little star kind of told me, sonny."

They were all in the study, in the very room where J. F. had died; enough of them to crowd the room. Headquarters men, and the red-headed assistant district attorney, and Charles Fox—thin and gray and shifty-eyed beside the imposingly monumental lawyer, Horace Sibley. Jewel Worth, looking crisp and efficient, sat with a notebook in hand. Lucas Beale seemed, somehow, shrunken inside his dressing gown. Jim Sutler dabbed at his perspiring, pale face with a moist handkerchief.

"Poor, twisted little devil!" said Harrigan. "He found his stepmother murdered, and took to his heels in unholy fright. Partly because he was afraid he'd be blamed for it. But mostly because he had been

stuffed with fear and hatred of everyone and everything."

Harrigan thrust his forefinger at Lucas Beale.

"I told you I knew what was going on! You were the kid's real tutor. Not Sutler, the poor ninny. You! Teacher, friend and playmate all rolled in one fat jelly. His pal. His Uncle Luke. The one he turned to for help. You must have shaken with belly laughter at the little fool.

"J. F. was too sick a man to realize what was happening, too busy with financial affairs to see what you were doing to his son.

"Ethel knew," said Harrigan, "and Ethel was as deep in it as you were. Because she stood to benefit most when Mervyn dropped out of the scene permanently. Not died. But locked away in a private institution somewhere!

"That was your life work, Lucas! To poison the boy. Warp his mind, fill his soul with horror, twist him into a diseased shape you could certify into an asylum as a dangerously unbalanced mental case—"

"No!" choked the sagging figure. "No!"

"Yes, yes," said Harrigan. "You gave him his gun, Lucas. You egged him on, into one jam after another, knowing that some day he'd slip badly, and Ethel would have her excuse and her evidence to put him away.

"That was it. A scheme to have him adjudged mentally incompetent. So he'd never inherit his property, leaving you and Ethel to enjoy his income for the rest of your worthless lives!"

The red-headed assistant district attorney mumbled, "But Ethel—"

Harrigan nodded. "Ethel was murdered. That's where the scheme slipped. With Ethel dead, Lucas can't collect one penny."

"Then he didn't kill her!"

"Of course not."

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Horace Sibley tossed his monumental head. "The boy did. The irony of fate. They made him a murderer—"

"No," said Harrigan flatly. "It wasn't Mervyn. I've got proof of that. Here."

One of the headquarters men handed him the brick. A white brick from the terrace. With the tiny star-shape of blood on it.

Harrigan said, "And Miss Worth has more proof. Go ahead, Miss Worth."

She sighed. "Well, I telephoned the executor of the will. It turns out J. F. didn't own all that property when he died. About six months ago, he sold the apartment building to a man named Appleby. The deed is recorded in Appleby's name, and there's a mortgage against the title. Ten thousand dollars."

Harrigan said, "I figured it was something like that. Great Jupiter with a crowbar couldn't pry a dime out of a trust account. The shake-down had to be somewhere else."

"The building was never sold, of course. Nobody would buy it, and let Charles Fox keep on collecting the rent in J. F.'s name. What happened is, somebody forged J. F.'s name to a deed, had it recorded, and then cashed in by getting a mortgage on the property."

Charles Fox looked dazed.

"I'll be damned!" he said. "It could be done that way. You'd have a clear title, only—well—"

"Only J. F. might decide to really sell the building," said Harrigan. "Then, to save his own skin, Appleby might commit a murder."

Charles Fox tightened his thin, gray face.

"J. F.'s death was suicide," he insisted harshly.

"It's no use," Harrigan told him. "We're going to find out who Appleby is, anyway. All we have to do is contact the mortgage company."

Fox's face drew out, worry-drawn. "When we find him," Harrigan said, "he's naturally going to try to clear himself of a murder rap. He'll try to frame you. If you're smart, you'll tell the truth. Which is that you came here to kill J. F. Crayton, but didn't because he had already been murdered!"

Fox dropped the thin, blue-veined lids over his eyes.

Harrigan said, "But you didn't raise an alarm. Murder meant investigation, detectives snooping around, the discovery of your embezzlements. So you tried to palm off the other man's crime as suicide—with the note, and by pocketing some piece of bloodstained evidence.

"Later, you couldn't tell the truth. The jury would have laughed at you. I would, myself. But now I'll give you a chance to prove I'm right."

Fox looked up, looked around at his lawyer. "It wasn't evidence. It was J. F.'s pen. A man with a fountain pen clipped in his pocket would have signed that note. So I took the pen and threw it away into some bushes near the Columbus statue in the park. It's still there, for all I know."

A pause. Harrigan's broad face looked quite satisfied. He didn't seem in the least bothered by the lack of evidence pointing to the actual killer.

"Getting back to this," he said, lifting the brick in his blunt, strong fingers. "I could make out that Mervyn or Lucas or even Jim Sutler—while supposedly he was washing his hands—took time to slip downstairs and murder Ethel. But none of them did.

"In fact," said Harrigan, "the killer never set foot on the terrace at all."

He was smiling, not a pleasant smile.

"It's queer about blood drops," said Harrigan. "You can tell how far they've fallen by the shape they take. This one dropped hard, shattered itself into smaller drops that joined together again, and made a star. It fell anyways a dozen or fifteen feet."

"But how could it?" cried James Sutler.

"It dripped off a knife that was high in the air. The knife," said Harrigan, "being fastened onto a twenty-foot stick with you on the other end of it upstairs."

"Me?" gasped the pale tutor.

Harrigan toyed with the brick placidly. "I had a talk with Mervyn about some things. He says he never jumped you with a knife at all. He had the knife in his hand, in class, and you suddenly made a grab for it. He drew back in alarm, and you got accidentally cut."

"He lies! He damned near sliced my arm off!"

Harrigan yawned. "The Tucson telegram, Miss Worth. This is from the doctor who dressed the wound. Superficial, he says. If you've got an ugly scar, you made it so with salt."

"Salt!"

"Yeah. You had some idea of bringing a lawsuit against J. F.; in fact, offered the doctor a cut to testify your way. He refused, so that was out.

"But," said Harrigan, "you weren't sticking around for love of your job. I knew that the minute I stepped into the room today. It was something else you were after, and most likely money.

"You got it by forging J. F.'s name on that deed. And Ethel's, too, because in this State a man can't sell real property without his wife's consenting signature. And that is why you had to kill them both!"

But contrary as it may seem, this person is not ruled by her emotions. Consider the very even basic line. The small letters are firmly made, and the pen pressure is uniform throughout the writing, showing good judgment and self-control. The upright slant also shows a practical side, and the closed o's caution. The medium size of the small letters and pointed n's and m's indicate good memory, patience and ability to concentrate on detail. When the beginning and ending strokes are missing, it shows a clear, accurate thinker and, if the writing is that of an educated person, well-developed mental powers. It might be interesting to point out here that the writer of this sample is an editor.

The moderate capital I shows that the writer does not force herself upon others and goes about her business in a quiet manner. This may sometimes be construed as timidity, but another look at that sensible capital I proves that such is not the case.

Sudden heavy pen pressure as in the letter y shows persistence, strong personal opinions and convictions, and also temper, impatience, and irritability that is not lasting but which is not always controlled. I have found, however, that these sudden heavy down strokes, in writing that otherwise has even pen pressure, are made by people who are more or less of the active, nervous type. They are often irritable and cross, not because they are bad-tempered, but because it is not easy for them to keep tabs on all the impulses to which their natures are subject.

Quick humor and imagination are shown by the dashlike i dots placed past the letter. Makers of these i dots are energetic and like to finish what they start.

Naiia Andreyeff.

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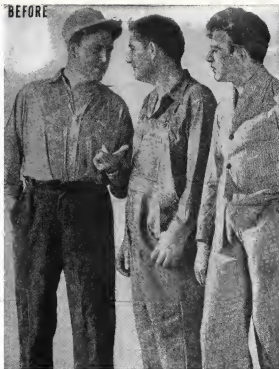
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